Part I General issues in ethnicity and language

1 What is ethnicity?

> *Race is not rocket science. It's harder than rocket science.* (Christopher Edley, Jr., Foreword to *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences, vol. 1*, 2001)

As a professor, I've noticed a recent trend of resistance among my students to forms that ask them to specify their ethnicity by checking a box. They see it variously as racist, irrelevant, inaccurate, or nobody's business but their own. Several students have told me that they respond to such forms by marking "other____" and writing in next to it simply "human being." I respect their choice to do this and I applaud their small protest against the way that such forms oversimplify the question of ethnicity in our diverse and complex world. However, I also know as a social scientist that most "human beings" do *not* see themselves as members of a great undifferentiated whole. Whatever our political leanings, however open and accepting of others our character might be, we nonetheless tend to cling to the distinctions among us. Most teenagers in Western societies, for instance, would die of embarrassment if somebody thought that they dressed like, acted like, or talked like their parents. They go to great lengths to avoid this possibility, including developing new **slang** terms and discarding them like used tissues, in an attempt to stay one step ahead of the game. In our heterosexually oriented modern communities, men do not usually like to be mistaken for women and vice versa. Even drag queens, a group that would seem to contradict this idea, enact an identity that relies on the audience's knowing that they are, in fact, biologically male (Barrett 1999). And in any country where multiple ethnic groups are represented, from Australia to Zimbabwe, ethnicity (however we define this term, and it won't be easy) will be a salient factor that social scientists must take into account.

The study of ethnicity (which, you'll notice, I still have not defined) is a field unto itself. Although it has formed a crucial part of the

development of sociolinguistic theory, most linguists, with a few notable exceptions, have spent relatively little time on the definition of ethnic categories in the abstract. But the sand has run out. I cannot in good conscience write a book on the topic of "language and ethnicity," and bring to it expertise only in language, hoping the other half will sort itself out. So I will draw here on the substantial literature that has been produced exploring the central relevant questions: What is ethnicity? How is it related to race? What is an ethnic group? Everyone who knew that I was writing this book has said, "You have to give a definition of ethnicity." Yes, I tell them, thanks so much for the advice. But when volumes have been devoted to exploring this single question, I can hardly get by with hammering out a two-line blurb at the beginning and then just moving on. So I will try in this chapter to give a feeling for the discussion that has taken place in the history of research on race and ethnicity, among scholars much more qualified than I am to address this topic, even though it is impossible to cover the discussion comprehensively in this short space. And, despite the well-meaning advice of friends and colleagues, I leave open the possibility that I may not be able (or willing), in the end, to pin down one single definition of ethnicity for the purposes of this book.

1.1 *AREAS OF AGREEMENT ABOUT* ETHNICITY

Many (if not most) native speakers of English hear the term "ethnicity" and recognize it as a word they know. But actually delimiting the exact meaning of this word, as is so often true with **semantics**, turns out to be a complex endeavor. Scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, ethnic studies, and even linguistics, have approached this problem in a number of ways, which will be discussed further below. There are, however, a few areas of preliminary agreement about ethnicity across the approaches and disciplines, particularly among the most recent writings on this topic, and I will begin by giving an overview of those commonalities.

First, scholars across the disciplines (and I include the linguists here as well) agree that ethnicity is a ***socially constructed*** *category*, not based on any objectively measurable criteria. For a while the term "ethnicity" was used as if it were the socially defined counterpart to the biologically defined "**race**." The problem, of course, is that years of scientific research have failed to yield any reliable biological

rubric for grouping human beings into racial categories. As Zelinsky reports:

> After decades of effort during which many classificatory schemes were proposed, then rejected, physical anthropologists have finally admitted defeat. It has proved impossible to arrive at a set of quantifiable morphological and physiological features whereby we can unequivocally compartmentalize all human beings into a small array of discrete races. (2001:8)

Omi and Winant use the term "racial formation" for the social construction of race, more specifically for "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (1994:55). I will return to the relationship of ethnicity and race in a moment, but the main point here is that both of these categories must be treated as socially constructed, and this reality must be incorporated into any definition we might use.

On the other hand, the fact that "ethnicity" and "race" may be socially constructed *does not mean they are purely hypothetical concepts* that have no basis in reality. A number of studies acknowledge the presence of a line of thinking of this type in the earlier research, and Bobo, for example, notes that even up to the present some scholars have "argued vigorously for discontinuing the use of the term 'race'" (2001:267). However, a majority of recent works insists that these concepts are both real and crucial, and it is perilous to dismiss them as mere constructs. Zelinsky notes, "In terms of practical consequences, race as something collectively perceived, as a social construct, far outweighs its dubious validity as a biological hypothesis" (2001:9). In a similar vein, Smelser et al. say:

> The concepts of race and ethnicity are social realities because they are deeply rooted in the consciousness of individuals and groups, and because they are firmly fixed in our society's institutional life. (2001:3)

Regardless of the social relativity of their definitions, or of whether we believe that race and ethnicity should or should not have the prominent role in society that they have, we cannot dismiss them as having no basis in reality. The ideologies associated with them create their own social reality.

Another point of general agreement is that ethnicity *cannot be studied or understood outside the context of other social variables*, such as gender or social class. Urciuoli (1996:25ff.), for example, discusses in detail the conflation of class and race, and how, in the dominant ideologies,

this can lead to an automatic association of certain ethnic groups with "the underclass." As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the speakers in the Puerto-Rican American community that Urciuoli studied often equated becoming more middle class with becoming more white. With respect to gender, Bucholtz notes that "any performance of ethnicity is always simultaneously a performance of gender" (1995:364); Omi and Winant express a very similar idea, saying, "In many respects, race is gendered and gender is racialized" (1994:68). As noted earlier, the construction of identity by individuals is a complex and multifaceted process in which ethnicity may be only one note, possibly not even the dominant note, at a particular moment. I have touched on these ideas only briefly here, but I will return to and develop them repeatedly throughout the discussion.

In addition, most works on race and ethnicity acknowledge the important roles of *both self-identification and the perceptions and attitudes of others* in the construction of ethnic identity. As Smelser et al. note, the categories of race and ethnicity are to some degree imposed by others and to some degree self-selected (2001:3). In modern societies that value self-determination and respect the right of each individual to define himself or herself, it is easy to fall back on the utopian idea that a person's race or ethnicity is whatever he or she says it is. But while this can be true on one level, on another level one cannot be completely free of the views and attitudes of others in the society. There are numerous references in the literature to the explicit need of community members to be able to categorize others ethnically (and in other ways). Omi and Winant see this as particularly true of race:

> One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race . . . This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize – someone who is, for example, racially "mixed." (1994:59)

A Puerto-Rican American woman in Urciuoli's study commented, "[T]he people at work try to categorize me, keep trying to get out of me what I am *really*. Really Spanish? Really black? Really East Indian?" (1996:144). **Phenotype** may play a particularly crucial role in the community's categorizations. Anulkah Thomas (personal communication) reports the experience of a Panamanian girl of African descent who was told by a teacher to check "black" on the census form because "that's what people see when they look at you." The need of others to categorize an individual's race and ethnicity forms a part of the context in which that individual constructs his or her identity.

I myself have been the subject of **ascription** to an ethnicity I would not normally claim. My father was a generic white American with no association to a particular European ancestry. My mother is from Madrid, Spain. On census forms, I would normally check "white" as my race. Still, the legal definition of Hispanic by the US Office of Management and Budget is: "All persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race" (Smelser et al. 2001:xxviii). By this definition, I qualify as at least half-Hispanic. Phenotypically, some people have told me that I look to them like I could be "a Latina," a perception which is probably enhanced by my being a native speaker of Spanish and my being named "Carmen." My students usually know that I am fluent in Spanish, and that I have conducted research on Chicano English. As a result of these factors, I believe, an undergraduate who thanked me and another professor (who was from Mexico) in her senior thesis referred to us as "two strong Latinas." Among other things, I think this points to the important role of language in ethnic identity ascription. The fact that I felt a small thrill of pleasure at this involuntary moment of "**passing**" also says something about what it means to be a member of the dominant ethnic group, a topic to which I will return in Chapter 6.

A good **ethnographic study** of the role of the community in defining ethnic membership is Wieder and Pratt's (1990) research on the Osage tribe. All communities (and **communities of practice**) will have norms for evaluating who is and is not a member, sanctions for behaviors the group considers unacceptable, and so forth. Probably because of the historical implications of membership in certain tribes, there is much overt discussion in some Native-American communities of who is or is not "a real Indian."[1] The answer to this question about ethnic identity can have repercussions in many practical areas, such as determining who is registered as a member of a particular tribe, who is entitled to government services or health care, or who can vote in tribal elections. Side by side with these is a completely different set of concerns, related to the historical oppression of Native Americans, including issues about who has "sold out" versus maintaining pride in their culture.

Wieder and Pratt (1990) found that a number of factors outsiders (particularly European Americans) might consider to be important in defining group membership are quite useless and may even disqualify the individual in question from true status as a "real Indian." Instead, they treat being a "real Indian" as a process, rather than a static category. What is of most interest here is the constant reference to

others (and the recognition of others) in how Wieder and Pratt set up the framework for the construction of ethnicity in this community. Osage community members "discuss the obvious Indianness, or lack of it, of a candidate Indian. 'Is he [or she] really an Indian?' is a question that they ask, and they know it can be asked about them" (1990:47). In addition, many if not most of the "actions" they identify as relevant for this particular community involve language, language use, or **speech events** in some way.

A similar situation is described for African Americans in some communities by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). They note that "being of African descent does not automatically make one a black person" and that one can be denied membership in the larger African-American group (which they term a "fictive kinship system") because of actions that signal a lack of loyalty or some other lack of adherence to the norms considered appropriate to group membership (1986:184). Although the relative roles of "other" versus "self" in defining one's identity, particularly one's ethnic identity, may vary a great deal from one community to another, the groups discussed here illustrate the strength and multiplexity that the "other" component can have.

1.2 POSSIBLE DEFINITIONS OF ETHNICITY

Almost all the large-scale works on the topics of race and ethnicity begin by trying to define one or both of these elusive terms, and many also start by taking apart the definitions posited by earlier generations of researchers. Scholars from the various relevant disciplines, including sociolinguistics, seem to have taken three basic approaches to this problem: 1) trying to define *ethnicity* in isolation; 2) trying to define *ethnic group* instead, then defining *ethnicity* as a corollary term; and 3) trying to define *ethnicity* in relation to *race*. Each of these has advantages and disadvantages. Below is a small sampling of the types of definitions of *ethnicity* or *ethnic groups* that can be found in the literature:

> Ethnicity, then, is a set of descent-based cultural identifiers used to assign persons to groupings that expand and contract in inverse relation to the scale of inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the membership. (Cohen 1978:387)
>
> [Ethnic groups are] human groups that entertain a subject belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and

> migration . . . it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. (Weber, cited in Smelser et al. 2001:3)
>
> [An ethnic group:]
>
> 1. is largely biologically self-perpetuating
> 2. shares fundamental cultural values . . .
> 3. makes up a field of communication and interaction
> 4. has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order. (Barth 1969)
>
> The ethnic group is a modern social construct, one undergoing constant change, an imagined community too large for intimate contact among its members, persons who are perceived by themselves and/or others to share a unique set of cultural and historical commonalities . . . It comes into being by reasons of its relationships with other social entities, usually by experiencing some degree of friction with other groups that adjoin it in physical or social space. (Zelinsky 2001:44; italics removed)

We see among these definitions certain similarities, which I will return to in a moment, and also some contradictions. Barth, for example, views the ethnic group as "interacting," while Zelinsky seems to suggest that if the members of the community actually have a lot of intimate contact, they are disqualified from being an ethnic group. Although Zelinsky's definition (along with the accompanying discussion) nicely sums up the main features found in many of the others, this particular element of it seems questionable to me (what about groups that are dying out, for example?). The summary of the definitional problem that I most admire is found in Omi and Winant (1994), the second edition of a well-respected, much-cited work on the sociology of race. The authors give a detailed and insightful analysis of how these concepts function, but, rather than attempting to define them they say, simply, "The definition of the terms 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity' is muddy" (1994:14).

1.3 POSSIBLE DEFINITIONS OF RACE

The definition of race is complicated in many of the same ways as that of ethnicity. As noted above, we must acknowledge race itself as a constructed category, but that still leaves us with the problem of defining it. In some cases scholars make no explicit attempt to separate race from ethnicity, as in this definition from W. E. B. DuBois:

> What, then, is race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. ([1897] 2000:110)

Omi and Winant (1994), as noted above, give no explicit definition of ethnicity, although they clearly have the understanding that it is different from race, as shown by the fact that they discuss these concepts in separate sections. Their definition of race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (1994:55).

In other cases, race and ethnicity are deliberately separated by some criterion, the most frequent one being elements related to physical appearance:

> *"[R]ace" is a social category based on the identification of (1) a physical marker transmitted through reproduction and (2) individual, group and cultural attributes associated with that marker*. Defined as such, race is, then, a form of ethnicity, but distinguished from other forms of ethnicity by the identification of distinguishing *physical* characteristics, which, among other things, make it more difficult for members of the group to change their identity. (Smelser et al. 2001:3; italics in original)

Interestingly, Smelser et al. do not actually provide a separate definition of ethnicity that can be referenced as part of the explanation above. Here is another definition linking these two terms:

> Common usage tends to associate "race" with biologically based differences between human groups, differences typically observable in skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and other physical attributes. "Ethnicity" tends to be associated with culture, pertaining to such factors as language, religion, and nationality. (Bobo 2001:267)

Bobo adds that, "[a]lthough perceived racial distinctions often result in sharper and more persistent barriers than ethnic distinctions, this is not invariably the case, and both share elements of presumed common descent or ascriptive inheritance" (2001:267).

There are a large number of scholarly works that focus on how race is constructed (including, among many others, Davis 1991, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, Omi and Winant 1994, Gandy 1998). In particular, it is enlightening to look at how different sociopolitical contexts affect this process in different countries around the world. A number of scholars have argued convincingly that the dominant ideology of race in the United States, for instance, centers around a black–white

dichotomy, in which other groups (like Asian Americans) and variations within groups are pushed to the side. People of mixed black–white ancestry are classified as black under the "one-drop rule" (see Davis [1991] for a full discussion). Even as late as 1986, the US Supreme Court refused to overturn a ruling against a woman who sought to have her race reclassified as white, legally; the woman, Susie Phipps, had one African-American ancestor six generations back (Davis 1991: 9–11). In this view, skin-tone differences between African Americans or European Americans are downplayed in racializing discourses (even though these may have practical repercussions of their own). This ideology can lead to some paradoxical situations, such as the idea suggested by Ignatiev that in the USA "a white woman can give birth to a black child, but a black woman can never give birth to a white child" (1995:1).

On the other hand, in South Africa, historically a similar range of phenotypes has been broken up differently. There, Europeans and Africans are treated as different racial groups, but there is also a third relevant group (leaving aside South Asians for now), people who were classified by the Apartheid government's oppressive system as "Coloured," corresponding to people whose racial ancestry was believed to be mixed.[2] This means that the same three individuals – one of unmixed African (Bantu) descent, one of unmixed European descent, and one of mixed African and European descent – are grouped differently by the ideologies of the two countries. In the US hegemonic dichotomy, the European-descent individual would be seen as different and the other two would be grouped. In South Africa, they represent three different racial groups. In fact, McCormick suggests that, in post-Apartheid South Africa, allegiances are developing between mixed-race and European descent groups focused against the black majority (2002a:4). There are also locations and times in the history of the United States when the ethnic groupings would have been more like those of South Africa, such as antebellum Louisiana (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5).

The distinctions that national and community ideologies make between ethnicity and race are also crucial to explore in terms of understanding how these concepts are constructed (and indexed through language). Urciuoli gives one perspective on such ideologies in the USA:

> When people are talked about as an ethnic group . . . the ideological emphasis is on national and/or cultural origins. This emphasis gives them a rightful place in the United States and their claim to