Definition: **ethnicity** from *A Glossary of UK Government and Politics*

Deriving from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning ‘tribe’, today the term is used to describe people who, through long association of kinship, culture and often religion – as well as skin colour – share a common sense of identity. It refers to the mixture of different social characteristics that give a social grouping a common consciousness and separates them from other social groups. Ethnicity is widely seen as a more useful concept than **race**, which has emotive connotations.

Summary Article: **Ethnicity**

*From Encyclopedia of Identity*

Ethnicity and identity are closely aligned in popular and academic discussions. In fact, many often use the term **ethnicity** as a way to identify how individuals are grouped or group themselves according to some shared national or regional heritage, religion, class, language, or culture. In other words, ethnicity generally refers to a community or group of people who share some form of “kinship” with each other that identifies them as different from (to varying degrees) other communities within a particular region, city, or nation. It remains a way to differentiate one group from another for political, cultural, social, class, or racial reasons.

Sometimes ethnicity is confused, and actually used synonymously, with race. That is, in everyday discussions of identity, one’s ethnicity can be thought to refer to his or her race. For example, within the United States, the common assumption remains that to identify as Black (race) automatically means that one is to be identified as being African American (ethnicity); however, Caribbean Americans of African descent might identify themselves as being Black but not African American because of a difference in national origins (Jamaican, Guyanese, Trinidadian, Barbadian), history, or cultural heritage (music, food, dance, etc.). Or someone might be referred to as White but identifies himself or herself as Italian American, Polish American, or Russian American.

How the borders of an ethnic group are determined—who belongs to, or who should be classified as belonging to, a particular group—has been the subject of much debate, especially when it underlies such issues as migration, immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism, racial and postracial identity, and citizenship. These debates often arise (and have arisen) in different ways in the media, as well as in academic and government institutions.

**Etymology**

As the previous examples intimate, ethnicity usually refers to the members of a minority group that has relocated to a new place across a national border, where there is a dominant native group. For example, the adjective is often used to precede minority, as in ethnic minority. In this manner, the term **ethnic** identifies persons whose claims to a new country are not as solid as those of the dominant group, whose ancestors were born in that country. This tension between who belongs and who does not, or who has more of a claim to (the benefits of) a particular space, has been a part of the historical use of the term **ethnic**, the root of which is the Greek word *ethnos*. As Thomas H. Erikson points out, *ethnos*...
is derived from *ethnikos*, which was employed to mark someone as a heathen or pagan. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that ethnicity was used to name heathendom and to describe heathen superstition. According to Erikson, for some 500 years, from the 14th to the 19th century, this primarily negative connotation continued with its use in English. He notes that the term *ethnicity* began to be used to connote racial characteristics in the 19th century.

David Reisman, an American sociologist, has been credited for the first contemporary use of the term *ethnicity*. In a 1953 issue of the *American Scholar*, Reisman describes an interclass relationship in which the minority group feels threatened by the better-educated middle- and upper-class people of a given region. Erikson traces the uses of the term *ethnic* to World War II, after which it was employed to politely refer to people of Jewish, Irish, Italian, and other origins or backgrounds who were regarded as inferior to persons descended from a British bloodline or to those who belonged to the American nation.

**Conflicting Definitions**

Because ethnicity is often tied to migration, many scholars have questioned how these differences are maintained. Some have argued that because human beings have been migrating for such a long time and globalization has become a new factor, it has become increasingly difficult to create definitions or boundaries that depend on differences in race, language, religion, or culture. In particular, the question has been one of placement: Is it determined by the clothes one wears, how one physically looks, the language one speaks, how one pronounces certain syllables of the dominant language, the food one eats, or where one decides to worship? Is it determined by bloodline or by some form of self-identification? Or is it a combination of some of these factors?

Many authors and scholars have examined how an ethnic group gets identified as one using a three-pronged approach to their studies that takes into consideration (1) how others in a given society look at a particular group and regard them as such (ascripted identity), (2) how that group looks at and understands itself as a group (avowed identity), and (3) how ascribed and avowed identities are linked to reinforce their common cultural connections. In an examination of ethnicity as a source of strength or conflict, J. Milton Yinger proposes that this three-pronged approach to ethnicity might be the reason why there is some disagreement in the literature on ethnicity, as the definitions depend on some combination of those three factors. Yinger proposes that a fourth factor—hidden ethnicity—might help to resolve these disagreements. Hidden ethnicity considers the fact that not all ethnic lines might be immediately visible, as national ideologists sometimes work to hide the fact that there are indeed activities built around a common origin and ancestral culture in order to reinforce those ethnic boundaries.

To this end, Yinger points out that ethnic groups might be classified as hard or soft ethnicities. The hard ethnicities are those that have been established over time and have accepted and clear boundaries—who and what is in—and a strong ideology—why we are who we are, or the beliefs and practices that reinforce those boundaries; the hard ethnicities remain sociologically and psychologically important. Soft ethnicities, on the other hand, do not have fixed boundaries and ideologies; the boundaries are moveable partly as a result of what Yinger describes as ambivalent ideologies, a kind of a working definition of that group that is used for administrative or classification purposes.

**Historical Ethnic Conflicts**

Ethnicity has also become associated with the notion of conflict as in ethnic conflict. Over the past 20
For example, the Bosnian War (1992-1995) involved the Bosniak, Serb, and Croat ethnic populations, resulting in the conviction of former president Slobodan Milošević for war crimes committed under his watch. The current conflict in Sudan pits the Arab-dominated government against its non-Arab population, leading to the establishment of mass refugee camps within the Darfur region and a destabilized Sudan.

In post-9/11 United States, charges of racial profiling proliferated the debate of government’s immediate response, which was marked by nationwide investigations of Arab Americans and Muslim organizations, and continue to present challenges for the government and human rights activists. The response reignited the past treatment of Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. The Rwandan genocide of the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the mass executions of Tutsis and Hutus perceived to be sympathetic to the Tutsis by the then Hutu government, which had the support of the French-speaking African nations. The Crown Heights riots (Brooklyn, New York) of the early 1990s that stemmed from the death of a young Caribbean immigrant and the retribution killing of a Hasidic Jew partly arose from the tensions that result from separate (ethnic) communities living closely together in one area. This particular conflict held both racial and ethnic undertones because it involved not only Hasidic Jews but also Caribbean Americans and African Americans and had international implications.

The Crown Heights riots evoked the complexity of ethnicity because it involved three groups who were considered to be a part of American minority community. It brought to the fore a crucial aspect of ethnicity: an ethnic group's tie to another homeland. The close-knit Hasidic Jewish community, easily identifiable by their dress and rituals and regarded as a minority group within America's larger Jewish population, regard Israel as their homeland; Caribbean Americans hold claims to various islands in the Caribbean; and African Americans regard the United States and Africa as their homelands, a view that many Caribbean Americans also hold as a result of their history of forced migration into chattel enslavement.

The Crown Heights riots presented a peculiar challenge for discussions of ethnicity because of the overlapped and intertwined racial tensions, in which Jewish became equated with whiteness and the Caribbean American and African American communities were figured as Black. Some scholars have pointed out this type of fluid conjoining of race and ethnicity also appears within other conflicts such as in Trinidad and Guyana where parties are organized according to ethnicity, Indo-Trinidadian or Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Trinidadian or Afro-Guyanese, and resulting conflicts and disenfranchisements of either group based on which party ascends to power often get termed as race-based discrimination.

**Ethnicity and Political Organization**

As the previous situations highlight how ethnicity has been at the root of, or factored into, historical conflicts, ethnicity has been used as a tool to organize politically and bring services within many multiethnic societies. For example, within the United States, immigrants from various countries found ways to continue to share and build with each other despite, and as a result of, the demands of immigration. Scholars have noted that throughout the 20th century, Caribbean nationals, the Irish, Russian and Polish Jews, Mexican and Latin American immigrants, African Americans who migrated from one region of the United States to another, and other immigrants often provided services for their communities such as education, health care, child care, early childhood education, language education, homeownership, and other cultural and political organizations. The same can be said for ethnic
communities such as Indian nationals who migrated to Britain, or Algerians in France. These organizations often celebrated their differences from the larger population and made concerted efforts to re-create some of the culture of their homeland, as well as to provide services that often were not available to these minority groups in their new nations.

**Ethnicity in the Academy**

Many higher education institutions have Ethnic Studies departments or programs, which focus on the very question of how social categories are formed within the United States and elsewhere. Sometimes called Minority Studies, the departments and programs generally aim to cover myriad questions and issues related to the race, nation, religion, and culture of ethnic peoples. Generally interdisciplinary in nature, the goals of the programs and departments often are to address ever-changing questions related to these populations, which necessarily transgress the boundaries of academic disciplines and therefore draw on the resources of scholars of religion, philosophy, literature, history, music, anthropology, sociology, politics, and law.

**See also**

Culture, Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, Nationalism

**Further Readings**


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