

A DEVELOPMENTAL DESIGN FOR UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY*

Charles C. Irby

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Carl O. Sauer, the late dean of North American anthropology, noted that:

We are touching upon a very serious topic that Americans, with their emphasis on acculturation, Americanization, and so forth, have never explored properly. Our own cultural minorities, living and surviving, persisting in some of their own attitudes of values and consciences, have a seminal as well as a historical significance as long as they resist absorption into the general pattern, but we pay little attention to them.¹

More than two decades since those words were spoken there has been a multitude of published works on cultural and ethnic minorities,² and still "little attention" is paid to the realities of these folk.

*This is a revised version of "Developing a Philosophy of Ethnicity," a paper presented at the 37th Annual Meetings of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, Oregon State University, Corvallis, June 15, 1974, and at the First Pacific Northwest Regional Conference of the NAIES, Eastern Washington State College, Cheney, November 13, 1976. The author is grateful to John C. Leggett and Robert B. Yoshioka who responded critically to earlier versions of this paper.

¹Carl O. Sauer, "Retrospect," in William L. Thomas, Jr., ed., *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Chicago, 1956), p. 1132.

²Ethnic minorities is used here in the popular sense of nonwhite peoples in the United States.

Even less attention is paid to the role of ethnicity as it pertains to ethnic groups in the United States. Materials designed to meet the demands of ethnic minorities have been pouring from the presses during the past decade, but very few of these have addressed the potentially exciting topic of ethnicity.

The plethora of ethnic materials that have glutted the market are not sufficiently different from the hackneyed academic literature that was published before the ethnic market was opened to warrant serious consideration, i.e., manuscript for manuscript, the visible ethnics were probably better off when the Saue position was first articulated. The literature easily tells its own story.

Donald K. Fellows' *A Mosaic of America's Ethnic Minorities*,³ as an example of materials about nonwhite people, was castigated in the *Professional Geographer* for its failure to include white ethnics. The negative criticisms, though warranted, missed the essence of what was being propagated about "Blacks, Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans." The book is egregious, and it combines the worst features of most of the poorly rendered works on how scholarship exploits visible ethnic minorities in American society. The following examples from the book are illustrative.

The incoming African brought only remnants . . . with him. (p. 31)

"The freed-slave was starting from . . . 'cultural zero.'" (p. 39)

While it is true that the Mexican-American owes much to his Spanish forebears, he also owes much to the Indians who . . . bequeathed to him a stoicism that enables him to face adversity without flinching. (p. 48)

Once off the reservation, the Indian finds himself low man on the totem pole. (p. 90)

³Donald K. Fellows, *A Mosaic of America's Ethnic Minorities* (New York, 1972).

While the majority of Chinese are still struggling to attain full equality, the sage advice of Confucius must have seemed somewhat verified when, in 1959, Hiram Fong was elected United States Senator (p. 100)

Despite their reputation for industriousness and dynamic energy, the one virtue most often associated with American Japanese is stoicism, the ability to take whatever "fate" as the "axe" falls. (p. 126)

Family means much to the Puerto Rican and when a parental relationship is lasting, close ties are maintained, although the lack of a father figure does tend to increase the instability factor. (pp. 177-78)

There is yet to come a study in the United States dedicated to the clarification of ethnicity as it pertains to ethnic groups from other than Euroamerican hierarchical perspectives.⁴ Fellows' point, like many others, is that the United States is a happy "melting pot," and it is predetermined that all persons will eventually assume an Angloamerican character. This is true in spite of the fact that colored folk were never thought of as part of the melting thesis until

⁴Andrew M. Greeley's "What Is an Ethnic," in *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* (New York, 1969), pp. 15-30, reprinted in *The Journal of Comparative Cultures*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1972), pp. 11-19, is an erudite, graceful, and tactful approach to understanding what an ethnic is. His information, however, could be far more damaging to our concerns for understanding ethnicity than Fellows' if we allow ourselves to be lulled into believing that the following quoted information is the reality of United States culture history: "The immigrants were not welcome, and considerable pressure was put upon them to become Anglo-Saxon as quickly as possible. *Yet the pressure stopped short of being absolute; the American ethos forced society to tolerate religious and ethnic diversity even if it did not particularly like it.*" (Emphasis added.)

recently.⁵ One admittedly liberal historian was so intent on the melting pot thesis that he wrote about black people as being the same as white people with a different skin color--this is, of course, one way of expressing that black people have no essence except that which is derived from white folk. This kind of treatment not only degrades the humanity of black people, it sheds no light on who or what white people are.

There are too many studies about visible ethnic minorities predicated on the notion that American society is a melting pot without explaining the forces that created enclaves such as the *barrio*, the black ghetto, Chinatowns, and reservations in terms of ethnicity. Consequently, there are no studies that address the issue of ethnicity as it pertains to affluent persons who might reside within these bounds. Even the pluralists have left the question of "what is ethnicity" virtually untouched.

With regard to pluralism, Barbara Sizemore's definition is exemplary as she demonstrates keen insight into the problems of developing a consciousness for ethnicity.

Where so many groups with varying cultural patterns reside [as in the United States], pluralism and desire for inclusion confound the double contingency and the complementarity of expectation. Pluralism . . . is defined as the condition of cultural parity among ethnic groups in a common society.⁶

Conceptually, Sizemore's pluralism offers an exciting arena for intellectual combat with regard to defining

⁵It is clear that Israel Zanwill's play, *The Melting Pot*, 1908, is responsible for the ideologies that formed the basis for the myth, and that only white Europeans could ever get into the pot.

⁶Barbara A. Sizemore, "Shattering the Melting Pot Myth," in James A. Banks, ed., *Teaching Ethnic Studies* (Washington, D.C., 1973), p. 81.

images of ethnicity, but the theme is underdeveloped.⁷ Cultural parity makes no statement on ethnicity, and leaves what is being propagated vague. American pluralism, with its emphasis on parity, is bereft of content on the conscious level. Even "if" or "when" there is consciousness and content, the idea of justice is lacking.

During the course of a day (or even a lifetime), a person or a group of people might well go through all the stages found in the behavioral and social science literatures--assimilationist through pluralist--or none of the stages because these concepts are not usually a part of the consciousness of those who are seeking social justice⁸ nor those who have the power to make it a reality. Social justice for the *nishnawbek*⁹ certainly is not seeing the "Buffalo Soldiers" on television committing genocide against their ancestors even though blacks might gain some measure of pride in knowing that "they tamed the West like the whites." It is not social justice when a minority (as in the case of Irish and Italian Catholics in California) seizes authority (economic and political), becomes a majority (white), and oppresses a minority (as in the case of

⁷It seems an unfortunate choice that the National Council for the Social Studies chose to leave this theme undeveloped in its *Curriculum Guidelines for Multiethnic Education: Position Statement*, a supplement to *Social Education* (October, 1976).

⁸Briefly, social justice is the reality of attaining equal access to the goods and services of the society. It is in the attempt to attain social justice by individuals, rather than by groups, that the concept of cultural pluralism goes awry. This same fate might also await the conceptual developments of ethnicity.

⁹*Nishnawbek* is the plural form of *nishnawbe*, which refers to the inhabitants of present-day America who were "discovered" by Christopher Columbus. *Nishnawbek* is a self-defining image term employed by some scholars at the University of California at Davis. It is used here to acknowledge that reality.

Blacks, Chinese, Chicanos, Filipinos, Japanese, and/or *nishnawbek*).¹⁰ Finally, it is not social justice to fantasize that American society is black and white. Allen Frazier questions this fantasy from a *nishnawbe* perspective.

What does the Indian say when the white declares. "This land is our land. With our bare hands and by the sweat of our brows we carved a civilized nation. We fought and died for this land. It is ours."?

What does the Indian say when the black declares. "This land is our land. It was our blood, sweat, and tears that the whites used to build this nation. The first person killed in the Revolutionary War was black, in the War of 1812 there were black soldiers. and in all wars we have fought."?

Even today it is difficult for some Indians to understand how nature's earth, or the Creator's earth, or the Great Spirit's earth can be considered by men to be theirs. Nature belongs to all. Therefore, is it necessary to declare that "every Indian man, woman, child, and dog that died, did so because they wanted to live where they had lived for 30,000 years!"?¹¹

It can be readily seen that cultural parity and social justice are not equitable phenomena as they pertain to ethnicity.

There are, however, some inroads into particular aspects of ethnicity and ethnic groups, and four of these are recounted. Martin Kilson entered the political arena with the concept of

¹⁰See Barbara Hiura's "Developing a Consciousness for Ethnicity in California and Its Relevance to the Ethnic Studies Discipline," Mss. prepared for the 5th Annual Conference on Minority Studies, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, April 20-24, 1977.

¹¹Allan Frazier, "Cultural Geography of Black America" (Davis, Cal., 1969).

. . . the politicization of ethnicity. This means simply to use ethnic patterns and prejudices as the primary basis for interest-group and political formations, and to build upon these to integrate an ethnic community into the wider politics of the city or nation.¹²

Jack Forbes addressed the issue of deep cultural awareness of the *nishnawbek*. He wrote that

. . . stress should be placed upon the central dynamic élan of Native cultures. It is because of the élan that Native peoples are able to produce the arts, crafts, music, and poetry so admired by outsiders. Not only is the study of the basic values of Native American life important as a means of understanding Native cultures themselves, but these values (and the socio-cultural, religio-philosophical, and political behavior styles resulting therefrom) are significant because they provide a means for solving many of the significant problems faced by modern man.¹³

Fredrik Barth, dealing with ethnic boundary maintenance, as shown that

. . . ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.¹⁴

¹²Martin Kilson, "Politics of Black Ethnicity," in Rudolph Gomez, ed., *The Social Reality of Ethnic America* (Lexington, Mass., 1974), p. 79.

¹³Jack D. Forbes, "Teaching Native American Values and Cultures," in *Teaching Ethnic Studies*, p. 202.

¹⁴Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (London, 1969), p. 10.

Finally, Larry Cuban points to the heart of the problem concerning a dedicated search for ethnicity, at all levels, in the academy, i.e., ethnic content and white instruction.

"White instruction" is a shorthand term to describe those traditional methods of telling, explaining, and clarifying that have been the mainstay of classrooms for the last millenium. To graft ethnic content onto white instruction will shrivel and ultimately kill a hearty and vital effort.¹⁵

Kilson's statement on the politicization of ethnicity clearly delineates a conceptual ethnic characteristic as it relates to political power. None, however, gives an overview of ethnicity in the United States.

The attenuated philosophical foundation concerning ethnicity has led to this search for clarifying the issues involved. It is, therefore, with regard to developing a useful scheme, in the form of a preliminary specialty code, that this philosophy is predicated. The attempt is to provide a tractable "skeleton onto which to hang the flesh of ethnicity"¹⁶ in the form of a suggestive and philosophical, rather than definitive and ideological, framework.

Since the most accurate information is likely to flow into an open system (one that admits it does not have all the pertinent questions), the code is promulgated to enhance an understanding of what questions might be relevant with flexibility as the keystone¹⁷

¹⁵Larry Cuban, "Ethnic Content and 'White' Instruction," in *Teaching Ethnic Studies*, p. 104.

¹⁶Robert B. Yoshioka, "Ethnicity and Historiography: The Role of Social Science, Theory, and Research in Ethnic Studies," a paper presented at the 37th Annual Meeting of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, Corvallis, Oregon, June 12-15, 1974.

¹⁷This is perhaps too much to ask in a discipline-oriented academic environment, but we probably need much more creativity and less discipline to properly bring this subject out of the darkness.

for our concerns.¹⁸ Developing a philosophy of ethnicity from such a static design might well appear to be impossible. However, it is the creativeness of

¹⁸It might well be that the concept of ethnicity is nothing more than an academic exercise concocted by social and behavioral scientists to admit more "scholars" to their ranks. If this is even partially the case, then there has been and will continue to be much wasted time, energy, and resources provided that the following proposition is near the mark. If the goal for an understanding of ethnicity relates to the attainment of social justice, then there is pragmatic justification for dealing with the subject from any and all angles that move us toward that reality. It seems highly unlikely that persons can derive any satisfaction from ethnicity when they are hungry, oppressed, and dispossessed. It is with this clear understanding that the following hypothesis is predicated. The nature of ethnicity lies in an arena of social justice, and only a painstaking and dedicated search will determine to what degree this is true.

The singlemost outstanding characteristic regarding ethnicity in the United States is that it emerges from the literature as a dynamic vehicle seeking "access and exclusiveness" as provided in Sizemore's cultural parity and the social injustices perpetrated by the Irish and Italian Catholics in California. Ethnicity exists in the minds of people as a beginning reality as they seek inclusion, but the process shows that it has neither definition nor end. Those "defined" as ethnically different from the power elite seek inclusion, and "if" included seek to limit that access to "others" who want to share equally in the goods and services of the society. Those in the power position, at every turn, seek to deny social justice to those without the means of going beyond the stage of demanding. All of this suggests that the dynamics of ethnicity can be found as it moves in the processes of formulation that never forms, and that ethnicity differs according to place (area), time, and situation (relationships).

the data that one brings to the design that will insure the development of philosophies relating to ethnicity. This creativity should lead to an understanding of the multiple-triggered processes within the design as they relate to the integration of function, pattern, and structure, which allows for greater visions of the dynamic processes involved. At the most elementary level, such integration will undoubtedly limit the usual (we are better or worse than) orientation when dealing with nonwhite folk in the United States. At the next level, a widening of the scope (a broader overview) must accompany changes in the angle (movement from point to point with a particular perspective) to the data that allows for probing, rather than groping, at the heart of our concerns. This simply means that we must understand and be dissatisfied with Aristotelian logic and the intractability of Cartesian metaphysics, and develop methods and procedures through which we can show results that satisfy our hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

Design and process, as keys in a developmental philosophy to manipulate the data, means that the analyst must be able to visualize and incorporate homology and analogy at any instance where homology outlines the historical antecedents that created the economic, political, spatial, and social relationships, and analogy specifies the current common causal conditions and processes in the breaking up or the maintaining of these relationships. Such a developmental philosophy is a method for dealing with the data that will reflect the most honest appraisal of characteristics that we so loosely call ethnic. At the same time, the developmental philosophy questions the value of studies which suggest (or state emphatically) that people who commune together have the same ethnicity.

One of the keys to ethnicity, suggested by this developmental philosophy, is difference. The factors of difference include cultural, economic, historical, social, philosophical, and political realities--real and/or imagined. That is to say, incompatible frames of reference exist among and between groups of people because their basic values are different. At this

stage of development, however, it is virtually impossible to say what ethnicity is in terms of an ethnic group. As a matter of fact, it is virtually impossible to find a national ethnic group in the United States (and the proposition is questionable on a regional basis), e.g., blacks do not constitute an ethnic group because of the spatial sociological differences that can be observed empirically.

What an ethnic group is not can help to underscore difference as a key to ethnicity provided that the right questions are asked. In turn, this key offers two important methods for the design: (1) it demands that differences be seen as different rather than equatable phenomena, i.e., cultural deprivation, cultural equality, cultural superiority, and so forth; and (2) it demands that the analyst learn something about "ethnic" lives as processes rather than conclusions with an eye for ethnic characteristics from a multiplicity of perspectives--especially her or his own perspective interfacing that of the group under scrutiny.

This preliminary specialty code for ethnicity has been developed to deal with the multiplicity of items that go into the question of "what is ethnicity." The primary question, however, might well be "what is relevant to ethnicity?" The listed items in this design are by no means exhaustive, and they should help in forming a catalyst in the determination of some ethnic characteristics that have hitherto remained veiled.

The ordering of this specialty code is arbitrarily alphabetical rather than degrees of importance being attached to any item. It is designed to work, for example, as follows: Accessibility and/or isolation to land (01:04) seeks to understand if ethnicity is a determining factor. Chicanismo (03:02.01) as a non-material cultural item tries to determine what role deep culture plays in the ethnic character formation of Chicanos. Provided that the data outlines ethnicity, vehicles of conveyance (08:02) are designed to summarize what modes are used to move it through time and space. The code is thus not presented here as definitive but as a beginning model.

PRELIMINARY SPECIALTY CODE FOR
UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>01: Accessibility and/or Isolation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 education 02 economic processes 03 housing 04 land 05 language 06 media (communications) 07 medical services 08 political processes | <p>05: Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 focality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> .01 structure .02 extent 02 function 03 pattern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> .01 spatial orientation .02 extent 04 process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> .01 external .02 internal .03 extent |
| <p>02: Biological Race and Sociological Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 cultural boundaries 02 genetics and race destiny | <p>06: Ideology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 current dimensions 02 historical processes |
| <p>03: Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 material (plastic arts) 02 nonmaterial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> .01 chicanism (chicanitude?) .02 negritude .03 nipponismo (nipponitude?) .04 nishnawbekélan .05 sinotide | <p>07: Images</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 referents by outsiders 02 self-referents 03 stereotypes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> .01 external .02 internal |
| <p>04: Demography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 core 02 migrations 03 new cores (or enclaves) 04 origins | <p>08: Methods and Vehicles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01 methods of transmission 02 vehicles of conveyance |

In sum, if ethnicity is a false path, then the specialty code should help in determining that character. If ethnicity is a viable path, then the specialty code can be a starting point. The pursuit of ethnicity is a worthy one because more information will become available from which to make better judgments about people who are "different from us," and from this position we can move toward our goals.
