

ON THE PROFESSION

What's Your eth?

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Humans are classifying animals. Many origin stories show the power of creation in naming, in identifying something or someone as a token of a type. Eototo, of the Hopi, creates animals by naming them; Ptah, of the ancient Egypt, orders the world by naming the things and beings in it. In Genesis, Adam is given dominion over the animals by learning their names. Platonic Greek philosophy invented the science of etymology in the hope that by knowing the "true name" *etymon* of something/someone one would gain control over it/them.

People classify themselves and others by many criteria and on many scales: kinship, natal community, occupation, social class, ethnicity, "race", religion, political party, sexual orientation. These scales are mobilized to structure various interactions. Kinship is often used to determine whom one should seek for a marriage partner, whom one can ask for financial aid, whom one can joke with, whom one can ask about sex, and whom one can go to, to have an "ow-ie" kissed and made "all better." Membership in a shared natal community can be mobilized for work levies (sandbagging against floods, cleaning irrigation ditches, neighborhood watches), for festivals (town patron saint day celebrations, block parties, founders' day), and for support of schools (bake sales, book drives).

Classifications aren't just about sharing traits, genes, or activities, affirming an in-group. They also differentiate "us" from "them". If you aren't "kin," then you are NOT part of the family. In some places, this limits entry to the home, or to places more intimate than the formal parlor. If you are not "from here," then you can't be trusted to understand how local society works. When "othering" limits the possibilities of the "others," the classifications are said to be discriminatory. Some discriminations are

less severe than others. In Toby Keith's song "High Maintenance Woman," he laments that "a high maintenance woman" (an attractive apartment owner) "don't want no maintenance man," even if he has "all the right tools." But there is the popular myth of the blue collar worker or *criada* who wins the heart and hand of a white collar or old-money elite.

Though "race" as an anthropological classification has been debunked through studies which document as much physical and cultural variation within "races" as across them, "race" is still an active cultural construct. In Louisiana one must state (and prove) one's race in order to get a marriage license. Race shows up as a category on the United States Census. The category "race" is activated in political campaigns. *Despite anti-discriminatory regulations, perceived racial categories affect housing patterns, employment opportunities, police strategies and court rulings.*

"Ethnicity" usually refers to a group identity based on a shared sense of origin, rooted in kin, and place. In parts of Latin America, the term *etnia* is used to refer to groups of indigenous people, sharing a heritage language and/or a heritage. Ethnic identity is mobilized to compete for development and human rights resources.

What hinges on ethnic or racial identity? In the United States recognized indigenous groups have rights as internal "nations;" they have rights to lands, self-governance and casinos. They have the right to issue and travel under their own passports. They have the right to maintain their languages, customs, and religious practices. Indigenous groups without federal recognition are typically engaged in legally pursuing such status.

In Guatemala, for example, ethnic identity comes into play everyday. When a woman wakes up in the morning, she must rapidly decide her identity for the day. Will she put on a skirt and blouse or an *uq* and *po't*? If she is indigenous by heritage and still living in an autochthonous community, deciding to wear Western clothing may draw criticism, stares, reduce merchants willingness to barter, and limit conversation on buses. If she is non-Indian, living in an urban area, deciding to wear indigenous clothing will draw questions from kin and co-workers, though a woven blouse (*po't*) alone or re-tailored indigenous cloth may bring expressions of approval.

Of course more is at stake than wardrobe and peer fashion pressure. Access to education, health care, jobs, political office, police protection and legal process is unevenly distributed between indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalan citizens. Last August a family from Tecpán Guatemala journeyed into Guatemala city before dawn, so that they could baptize their three sons (ages 23, 18 and 13), having been unable for years to have this rite performed in their home community because the children had Mayan names and the Tecpán priest refused to baptize them with "names of animals" (in fact none of the names in question had animal referents).

Why would you maintain an ethnic affiliation or identity in the face of discrimination? Clearly there are deep-rooted social benefits that have allowed groups to maintain their cohesion despite more than 500 years of pressure to assimilate. The "classic" scenario of assimilation is that promoted by colonial powers: assimilation to the colonizers' cultures. In the United States indigenous children were taken from indigenous homes and fostered with white families or sent to Indian boarding schools where their native

languages, dress, and religious practices were prohibited. Despite varying policies of the Spanish crown towards education and proselytization in the native languages of Latin America, the over-arching policy has been to teach Spanish and to insist on it for political office, legal documentation (though there may be copies in native languages), and education (though bilingual education is now spreading).

Of course, not all pressure to assimilate comes from the hegemonic powers. With the “final” court settlement of the Hopi-Navajo land dispute, many Navajo families faced having to move from their hogans. Responding to Navajo protest and mobilization of the press, the Hopi president replied that they did NOT have to move, they could simply become Hopi. Tellingly no Navajo chose this option.

Ethnic identity matters. It matters to individuals and it seems to matter to institutions, both governmental and non-, as goods and services may be distributed along ethnic lines, or, inversely, a government may wish to ensure that no favoritism among ethnicities is displayed.

The United States Census in 2000 listed the following “racial” options: (a) American Indian or Alaska Native; (b) Asian; (c) Black or African American; (d) Native Hawai’ian or other Pacific Islander; (e) White; and (f) “some other race”. This last category will be eliminated in 2010 “to increase comparability.” Also in 2000 the survey allowed people to self-designate as having roots in “two or more races.” This was treated as a separate category rather than co-counting with categories (a-f). Interestingly, in 2000 many people who checked “other” specified their “race” as a religious group, e.g. Sunni, Zoroastrian.

This “blending” of categories shows that “racial” categories are about sense of self and sameness, cultural principles and practices, and not necessarily tied to physiognomy.

Many of the colonial racial classifications seemed on the surface to be “about” “blood.” Moreau de Saint Méry (1797) lists the categories of race found in Haiti, based on an assumption of 128 “parts”: *blanc* 128 parts white; *negre* 128 parts black; *mulâtre* 64 black, 64 white; *sacatre* 8-32 white; *griffe* 24-39 white; *marabou* 40-48 white; *quateron* 71-100 white; *métif* 101-112 white; *mamelouc* 113-120 white; *quateronné* 121 to 124 white; *sang-mêlé* 125-127 white.

In Guatemala racial mixing included indigenous populations as well as black and European. Mörner (1971) documents the following: *español*, *indio*, *mestizo*, *castizo*, *negro*, *mulato*, *morisco*, *albino* (offspring of a *morisca* and a Spaniard, not one lacking melanin), *torna atrás*, *lobo*, *zambaigo*, *cambujo*, *albarazado*, *barcino*, *coyote*, *chamizo*, *coyote mestizo*, *ahí te estás* (offspring of a *coyote mestizo* male and a *mulata*).

Wagley (Harris and Wagley 1958) notes that in Brazil different terms included *branco*, *sarará*, *cabo verde*, *cabra*, *mulato* and *preto*.

In Peru, the 1940 Census listed the categories: white, mestizo, Indian, Negro and Yellow (Chinese and Japanese) (Parró, p. 15). However, in processing the forms the census takers found they could not tell a difference between whites and mestizos (only 13 percent of the sample self-designated), so they simply combined these categories. Only one percent of the population was either Negro or Yellow. Final figures showed 53 percent of the population to be white/mestizo and 46 percent to be Indian.

In those areas of Latin America with heavy pre-contact indigenous populations, the careful blood quotient categories of colonial times have simplified to a two-valued opposition. In Mexico, despite la raza ideology, chief divide is between *mestizos* and *indios*. In Guatemala, the duality is characterized as *ladinos* and *indígenas* (though *indio* is still a pejorative term). In Bolivia and Peru, it is *cholos* and *indios*. These categories are largely cultural.

The 1995 Peace Accord on Indigenous Rights in Guatemala (Minugua 1996) lists traits that would make someone an indigene, thus eligible for its protections. These traits are (1) indigenous language; (2) indigenous descent; (3) indigenous cultural practices/dress; (4) indigenous cosmology; (5) self-attribution. Though essentialist descriptions are out of favor among anthropologists and the Guatemalan census has not listed determinants for indigeneity since 1953 (dirt floor houses, indigenous dress, sandals rather than closed shoes, indigenous language), Guatemalans often make initial “racial” attributions on the basis of appearance and language. The salience of such exterior markers is eroding. An urban joke features two male office workers, who meet at a bus stop on Sunday, each accompanied by his wife, who is wearing indigenous clothing. The first man says to his co-worker, “I didn’t know you were Indian.” The second replies, “Oh? Just look at my wife.”

If we grant that ethnic/racial classifications are useful and that efforts to “increase diversity” require some knowledge of the current group composition, what classifications should we use? Taking the Americas as the target population, which labels and whose should be used? The colonial labels reflect both Eurocentric prejudice and the desire of the elites to keep power in their hands and to control the

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labor pool supplied largely by other ethnicities. Terms tend to be value laden, with whites and their labels at the top of the scale, though in is a commonplace adage in Brazil that “money lightens the skin”.

Still we know that in-groups are positively valued and out-groups distrusted. Kindergartners in the New Orleans Recovery District schools (Walton *personal communication*) use the following classification, based loosely on color: blue black, boot black, dark, chocolate or brown, high yellow, bright (divided into red, high yella, and bright bright), mix, café au lait, pass the paper bag test, passé blanc. White is defined by the children not as “color” but as “mean people.” An overarching classification, based on class and descent, rather than color is *Creole* vs. *Black*. Former Mayor “Dutch” Morial was famous among New Orleans African-Americans for having been “creole” in high school and college, but switching to “black” when he entered politics.

Identities are strategically deployed. Which identities are strategic for members of LASA? Ethnic and racial terms are not uniformly deployed throughout Latin America. *Indio* is an activist’s term of choice in Chiapas, but an insult on out-group lips in Guatemala. *Ixto*, another term for Indians in Guatemala, is derogatory no matter the speaker. In some Francophone areas, *indigene* is seen as colonial and paternalistic, with *autoctone* as the preferred term. The terms *Native American* and *First Nations* are not widely used outside the United States. Hegemons are variously known as *white*, *Caucasian*, *blanco*, *branco*, *mestizo*, *criollo*, *creole*, *Krio*, *cholo*, *ylo* *ladino*. Other ethnic terms include *chino*, *sambo*, *negro*, *bozal*. Self-identification varies as the scope of contrast expands or contracts. Dr. Enrique Sam Colop (*personal communication*) notes that at any given time

he might be indigenous, Guatemalan or K’iché. A registration form asking for ethnicity might get any number of responses from Bribri to Canardly (“can hardly tell”). One could go for broad categories linked to social theories: *hegemon* vs. *subaltern*. Still some members may reject the positioning of an autochthonous identity as “sub.” One could also allow for the possibility of noting both “descent” and alignment, e.g. “of European descent but aligned with original peoples of the Americas,” though this perhaps smacks of the trite “some of my best friends.”

A first approximation for mapping the current ethnic diversity of the LASA membership, with an eye toward increasing variety, could be simply to ask people to fill in the blank: ethnicity _____. The variation could then be analyzed to see if any “natural” groups emerge. A second survey might offer a series of labels and track responses: indio _____, indígena _____, native _____, autochthon _____, of European descent/heritage _____, of African descent/heritage _____, mestizo _____, criollo _____, creole _____, ladino _____, mixed _____, American _____, other (please specify) _____. The results of the two surveys might indicate to categories which, if not completely complementary and exhaustive, LASA members might willing self-ascribe. ■