

# **INSTRUMENTAL AND CONSTRUCTIVIST CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ETHNICITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR LATIN AMERICAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS RESEARCH**

## **CONCEPTUALIZACIONES INSTRUMENTALES Y CONSTRUCTIVISTAS DE LA ETNICIDAD: APLICACIONES PARA INVESTIGACIONES DE MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES EN LATINOAMÉRICA**

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### **Abstract:**

Within the realm of comparative politics ethnicity has been conceptualized as both a fixed category individuals are born into, as well as a relatively fluid identity that can be made politically salient by different actors. The latter perspective corresponds with instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity that seeks first and foremost to answer the question: ‘Under which circumstances will ethnicity become activated and affect citizens’ political behavior?’ Beginning in the 1990s, Latin American social movements began to ‘play the ethnic card’, which culminated with the first indigenous candidate ever to win a presidential election in the region in 2005. Applying research designs based on instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity could significantly advance the study of Latin American social movements.

Keywords: Ethnicity – Instrumentalism – Constructivism – Latin America – Research Design.

### **Resumen:**

Dentro del área de estudios de políticas comparadas se ha conceptualizado a la etnicidad como una categoría fija a la cual se nace, pero también como solo una de las múltiples identidades que pueden ser activadas políticamente. Esta última perspectiva corresponde al paradigma instrumental o constructivista que busca responder la pregunta: ‘Bajo que circunstancias se activará la identidad étnica de ciudadanos de modo tal que afecte su comportamiento político?’ Desde los 90s que los movimientos sociales en Latinoamérica comenzaron a presentarse como movimientos de origen étnico, lo cual culminó con la elección del primer presidente indígena de la región en 2005. Diseñar investigaciones utilizando nociones instrumentales y constructivistas de etnicidad puede avanzar el estudio de los movimientos sociales en la región.

Palabras Clave: Etnicidad – Instrumentalismo – Constructivismo – Latinoamérica – Investigación

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‘We, the Quechuas, Aymaras and Guaranties of Bolivia keep hearing from our governments: that we are narcos, that we are anarchists. This uprising of the Bolivian people has been not only about gas and hydrocarbons, but an intersection of many issues: discrimination, marginalization, and most importantly, the failure of neoliberalism.’

Evo Morales, President of Bolivia

Throughout the past decades, ethnically-based social movements and political parties have been gaining momentum in Latin America. It’s not that the members of these groups had never been represented in organizations before; it is just that the ethnic “label” had not been employed. Why would those formerly identified as peasants decide to re-group as something else? Might identifying along ethnic lines yield higher payoffs to those mobilizing?

‘Yes,’ would be the consensual answer among most current race and ethnicity scholars. The fluidity of identities that instrumentalist and constructivist approaches conceptualize has allowed researchers to focus on the incentives actors may have to select one identity over another. Since individuals have several potential identities, the ones that can yield higher political payoffs, they argue, will be chosen to label a certain group. And in actuality grouping along ethnic lines would be advantageous in the Latin American political arena in a way it hasn’t in the past.

In what follows I will first briefly describe instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity. I will then proceed to illustrate the type of research questions and designs that have resulted from these conceptual frameworks. Finally, I will identify how these paradigms could be fruitfully applied to research examining Latin American social movements.

## INSTRUMENTAL AND CONSTRUCTIVIST CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ETHNICITY

One of the reasons ethnicity has become a concept of increasing scholarly interest in the field of comparative politics has been the rise of intra-state conflict in post-authoritarian regimes. As stated by Fearon and Laitin, ‘an influential conventional wisdom holds that civil wars proliferated rapidly with the end of the Cold War and that the root cause of many or most of these has been ethnic and religious antagonisms’ (2003, p. 75). That ethnic differences correlate with animosity between groups seems like a plausible argument. This seems particularly likely in newly democratized nations where previous authoritarian regimes had suppressed dissenting voices and where elections with the potential to divide citizens across ethnic lines had been a rare phenomenon. However, ultimately the plausibility of the argument depends on what we are referring to when we say ‘ethnicity.’

Classic definitions of ethnicity tend to take a primordialist approach, according to which identities are fixed, immutable. It is assumed that ethnic identities primarily affect both actions and worldviews (Yashar, 2005), and that ‘one is invariantly and always perceived as a Serb, a Zulu, or a Chechen’ (Lake and Rothchild, 1998, p.5). This translates into research that takes ethnicity as an independent variable or factor of interest, which can affect important outcomes such as the onset of civil conflict. Scholars who adopt a fixed, primordialist, stance on ethnicity rarely define the concept. When identities are innate and fixed it is assumed that observers and objects of study utilize similar ethnic classifications, rendering further explanations unnecessary. As noted by Chandra, ‘many comparative political scientists do not define the term [ethnicity] before using it’ (2006, p. 398).

An alternative approach includes instrumentalist and constructivist approaches to ethnicity. Although they emphasize slightly different relationships between variables, the research

questions they lead to are similar. An instrumental approach will define ethnic identity within a rational choice framework. This enables scholars to theorize when it will be in the best interest of a set of actors to signal to national or international communities that they are in a given ethnic group. This focus on individual actors' decisions, as opposed to biology, allows assessments regarding expected benefits and costs to be made. As noted by Yashar, 'to explain why individuals choose to act, therefore, they assess the costs and benefits alongside the positive and negative incentives. In other words, one needs to look at individual intentionality and its collective consequences' (Yashar, 2005, p.11).

Constructivist perspectives highlight that not only is an ethnic label a signal emitted to others, but that it constitutes a *costly* signal. Although actors have the ability to rationally decide whether to 'play the ethnic card' if they have incentives to do so, this set of possible ethnic identities is limited. As stated by Olzak, 'there are limits to someone claiming to be, say, 'Chinese American,' without some reference to valid family ties (Olzak, 2006, p.35). In this sense, they conceptualize ethnicity as both fluid *and* situationally bounded (Posner, 2005, p.11).<sup>2</sup>

Instrumental and constructivist perspectives focus on when ethnicity is made politically salient by different actors. These might be politicians in the context of ongoing conflicts or rivalries in an electoral setting, or disenfranchised citizens if they perceive it might help their cause to frame an issue as having ethnic undertones. Ethnicity is thus conceptualized as just one of the many identities that can be made politically salient. Ethnicity is somewhat fluid, but not entirely so, as the set of possible ethnic identities for each actor is finite. A possible micro-foundation, which would facilitate ethnic identity becoming politically salient, has been offered by Hale (2008). He emphasizes the role identifying along ethnic lines can have in reducing

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<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that at a higher level of abstraction, the difference between these classifications might be somewhat blurred. Hale, for instance, argues that 'even primordialists are constructivists' (2008, p. 15), as they acknowledge cultural changes and evolution of identities.

uncertainty, as it can help navigate the social world in part due to its correlation with other factors such as values, and socio-economic indicators in some cases.

Even if certain ethnic cues like skin color do not usually change, Horowitz (1985) argues that specific contextual variables determine if individuals will be categorized according to these cues or other ones. He argues that even highly visible cues are not necessarily the primordial coding scheme employed by individuals at particular points in time. For instance, 'in seventeenth-century North America, the English were originally called 'Christians,' while the African slaves were described as 'heathens'' (1985, p.43). Only after 1680, when many slaves converted to Christianity, did ethnic distinctions take center stage. Horowitz thus concludes that, 'it is not the attribute that makes the group, but the group and the group differences that make the attribute important' (1985, p.50).

Conceptualizing ethnicity as an identity that can become salient at specific moments in time (as opposed to a fixed trait that is monotonically influential in people's political decisions) means that the type of research questions being asked changes. Ethnicity is no longer an independent variable to explain the onset of some other political phenomenon, but a political phenomenon to be studied in itself. This poses certain challenges. As highlighted by Posner, 'from the standpoint of theory building, the discovery that ethnic identities are fluid and situation bound has been paralyzing. The recognition that ethnic identities may shift from situation to situation has made students of ethnicity hesitant to propose general hypotheses' (2005, p.9).

The fluidity of identity activation has allowed scholars to explain outcomes that were previously regarded merely as outliers. For instance the correlation between poverty and violence highlighted by Collier (2007) could now be analyzed in more detail. Sen (2008) explains that Calcutta is the poorest city in India but has very low crime rates because local

politicians have historically activated class-based political identities (instead of ethnic ones). Ethnically ‘engineered bloodshed (...) results from the fomenting and cultivation of targeted differences, rather than being just a spontaneous outcome from an inescapable ‘clash’ (2008, p.7).

Research emerging from this instrumentalist/constructivist conceptualization of ethnicity has for the most part focused on explaining the effect of institutional settings in determining when ethnic identities will become politically salient. The mechanism at work follows the logic of Tilly’s more general notion of boundary activation. This mechanism ‘consists of a shift in social interactions such that they increasingly (a) organize around a single us-them boundary and (b) differentiate between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions’ (2003, p.21). This boundary is frequently an ethnic one, and the key variable is not ethnicity per se, but particular institutions that will motivate politicians to make ethnic-based claims and motivate constituents to vote along ethnic lines.

When institutionally activated, ethnicity has important behavioral implications. When ethnicity becomes politically salient voters will privilege voting for co-ethnic candidates (Horowitz, 1993; Posner, 2005; Chandra, 2007). Ethnicity is considered an ‘informational shortcut’ in incomplete-information environments (as elections certainly are) due to its inherent ‘stickiness’ (Chandra, 2006). Horowitz notes that, ‘ethnic affiliations provide a sense of security in a divided society, as well as a source of trust, certainty, reciprocal help, and protection against neglect of one’s interests by strangers’ (1993, p.32). This could prove especially consequential in newly democratized countries in which voters do not have many other cues, like political parties, to rely on (Posner, 2005). Citizens in patronage democracies, due to the severity of the

informational constraints come election time, would also be particularly susceptible to employ schemes of ethnic categorization (Chandra, 2007).

The behaviors of both politicians and voters frequently become self-reinforcing. Furthermore, formal institutions may be created as an effect of ethnic politics, ‘over time this equilibrium should also generate additional reinforcing mechanisms that allow it to persist even after the initial informational constraints that gave it birth are lifted. For instance, both voters and politicians have an incentive to create and maintain networks and institutions in order to reduce the transaction costs of communicating demands and delivering benefits’ (Chandra, 2007, p.103).

#### **NEW RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGNS**

Large N observational and experimental research designs have been implemented following this conceptual framework. They have in common employing subjective measures of ethnic identification. For instance, Eifert and his collaborators (2009) find that individuals are more likely to identify along ethnic lines come election time in ten African nations. Using attitudinal items from the Afrobarometer survey project they find that when asked how they describe themselves, the percentage of people to answer on ethnic terms (as opposed to based on religion, class/occupation, or gender) increases significantly during election periods.

Although constrained by significant data limitations, Posner’s (2005) research design includes both objective and subjective measures of ethnic identity. He asks if different institutional settings will affect the ethnic identities that are activated. Specifically, he poses that either linguistic or tribal identities will be activated depending on if a particular election in Zambia is a one-party or a multiparty contest, due to the fact that these elections require different

minimum winning coalitions to win. His primordial source of data is not survey-based but rather objective data in which Zambian government officials recorded the ethnic composition of different tribes. However, he complements this data with self-reported tribal identities, as well as some survey data he collects.

Habyarimana et al (2007) employ an experimental design to test rival theories regarding the mechanisms connecting ethnic diversity to the limited provision of public goods in Kampala, Uganda. Employing an experimental setup allows them to directly evaluate the relative value of preference-based theories, social network theories, as well as sanctioning theories in a way that would have been impossible to do with natural variance data. Furthermore, they ask participants not only to report the ethnic group they identify with, but also to report what they consider to be the ethnicity of fellow participants in the study. This allows the researchers to test claims regarding the theoretical effect of co-ethnicity in the provision of public goods. Alarming, they find that participants correctly coded the ethnicity of others only 50% of the time. This casts a serious shadow of doubt on previous research that assumes ethnicity is a fixed trait.

Recently scholars have gone a step further, and have begun comparing under which circumstances different types of identities will become salient, incorporating several dimensions into a single study. Bormann et al. (2015) examine the role different dimensions of ethnicity have on the entire pathway leading to civil conflicts: initial grievance perception, mobilization of rebels, and government accommodating to rebel demands. Their data includes, 'several linguistic and religious segments per group, it refrains from defining members of a given group as being *either* linguistic *or* religious, thereby avoiding ex post facto assessments of the relevant cleavage in a given ethnic conflict' (Bormann et al., 2015, p.2). This novel setup allows them to find that language cleavages are more likely to lead to ethnic conflict than religious ones.

## **MOVING FORWARD: APPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Within the realm of comparative politics ethnicity has been conceptualized as both a fixed category individuals are born into, as well as a relatively fluid identity that at times becomes salient, and at other times takes a secondary role with respects to other identifications (like profession, gender, etc). The consequences of ascribing to one or another definition of ethnicity significantly affects not only the type of research questions that can possibly be asked, but also the way in which these questions are answered. For those scholars who consider ethnicity to be fixed the relevant research questions take ethnic distribution as an exogenous variable and generally examine its effect on forms of political participation, as well as how particular institutional settings can diminish an inherent threat of discord or even violence. On the other hand, when ethnic identity can or cannot be politically salient, the question of utmost importance is under which circumstances ethnicity will be become activated and affect citizens' behavior.

It must be noted however, that both fixed and fluid notions of ethnicity have one aspect in common: they draw upon (and contribute to) institutional and behavioral approaches in comparative politics. Even when researches frame their work within one of these theoretical frames, the effects of the other are implicit. For instance, most of the current work assessing the effects of institutional settings on politization of ethnic identities are relevant insofar shared ethnicity is assumed to heighten trust and therefore influence voting behavior.

Research on social movements in Latin America could benefit from innovations in ethnic research that have emerged from the instrumentalist and constructivist paradigms. It is possible to conceive of an integrated research design that includes ethnicity both as a dependent variable to be explained (drawing from instrumentalism and constructivism) as well as an independent factor that can affect other political outcomes. Such a two-step process might involve asking first

if 'playing the ethnic card' increases the likelihood of external support for a given group's grievances (and thus makes it a rational frame to adopt), to later examine the consequences of employing such a frame on relations with individuals classified as not belonging to said ethnic group.

Beginning in the 1990s, Latin American social movements and political parties began to 'play the ethnic card'. In December of 2005 the region saw the first indigenous candidate ever to win a presidential election. Prior to that time however, 'there were few political parties in Latin America organized around ethnic identity, despite the ethnic diversity in the region. In the rare cases these existed they did not achieve enduring electoral success' (Van Cott, 2005, p.1). This scarce executive representation cannot be explained by a lack of significant indigenous population: in at least five Latin American nations the estimates of indigenous population accounts for at least 12% of the national total. In Bolivia, an estimated 60 to 70% of the population is indigenous. The range for Guatemala lies between 45 and 60%, for Peru between 38 and 40%, for Ecuador between 30 and 38%, and for Mexico between 12 and 14% (Yashar 2005).

Ethnic identity is particularly ambiguous (and thus especially fluid) in the region. Madrid (2005) emphasizes the effects this ambiguity can have on identification patterns: 'recently, a process of 'reindianization' is taking place in much of Latin America as large numbers of people, including individuals who are only partly of indigenous ancestry, have begun to adopt the indigenous label. Even today, however, many people who are mostly or wholly of indigenous ancestry do not identify as indigenous or will do so only under certain circumstances' (Madrid, 2005, p. 3).

It is not that members of such Latin American groups had never been represented in organizations before; it is just that the ethnic 'label' had not been employed until relatively recently. Why would those formerly identified as peasants decide to re-group as something else? Would ethnic identities inherently yield higher payoffs to those mobilizing? A natural variance large-N research design could compare time periods/nations/regions in which ethnic frames have been adopted to those in which they haven't, and assess if they have a significant effect on election outcomes or violence among groups.

Alternatively, an experimental design could examine whether national or international audiences react differently when exposed to group grievances that are identical except for whether an 'ethnic' or an 'economic deprivation' frame is being used for example. Outcome measures could include asking experimental participants if the particular frame they were exposed to affected whether they would be more likely to support such a group or provide foreign aid assistance. Such a hypothetical experiment could capture the dynamic observed by Yashar with respects to the second generation of ethnic social movements in Bolivia, 'the cocaleros saw the positive reception gained by the Kataristas and started to frame their struggle as one about indigenous rights. They banked on the perception that an ethnic struggle would resonate more powerfully than one for production alone. Hence they shifted their prior class-based rhetoric to one about indigenous traditions and pride' (Yashar, 2005, p.189-190). The second step of an integrated research design would then examine the effects employing an ethnic frame plays in specific outcomes such as the onset of inter-group violence, cooperation, or whatever variables were found to be significant in the first research phase using observational data. This might look perhaps like the Bormann et al. (2015) study mentioned above.

Recently, formal models have begun incorporating constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity, and drawing upon empirical findings that highlight the importance of group identification. Sambanis and Shayo's (2013) model predicts 'that intense ethnic conflict makes people care more about their ethnic group relative to other groups, and seek to resemble it more' (2013, p. 319). That is, the table is set to close the feedback loop full circle, utilizing different methodologies to examine under what circumstances ethnicity is more likely to become politically salient (including disaggregating by specific dimensions of ethnicity), the effect identifying along ethnic lines can have on conflict onset and intensity, as well as the reinforcing effect being involved in such a conflict can have on these identifications.

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