

Brubaker questions the concept of a group, because he describes it as an indispensable concept for a range of social sciences, yet only theorized in the frame of social psychology.

The author argues that questioning and reframing of this concept allow social scientists to focus on processes of construction and transformation of ethnic and national identities. In other words, the consequence of taking groups for granted and undertheorized is the idea of groups – ethnic groups, nations, races – as entities which somehow have their own will, and the notion of the world as composed of homogenous, bound units, “as a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial or cultural blocs” (page 8).

Talk about ethnicity and ethnic conflicts “somehow” almost automatically means talking about ethnic groups, and Brubaker reminds that through using concepts of “folk-sociologies” as analytical devices, those groups and conceptions are being reified.

Brubaker writes that in order to go “beyond groupism” there are several notions which should be addressed:

1. ethnicity should be rethought – as a processual, performative, situational relation
2. the reality of ethnicity – ethnicity is a real social phenomena with material consequences, and yet reality of ethnicity (race, nation) does not depend on natural existence of ethnic groups (races, nations).
3. groupness is an event – groupness should be approached as variable and contingent event, rather than as a fixed and given situation: groupness is something that happens, a verb and not a noun. This understanding of groupness implies that groupness may fail to crystalize and happen – which Brubaker sees as a very helpful explanation for some situations.
4. groups and categories are not the same – category is a potential basis for forming group/groupness, a conceptual foundation on which groupness may be constructed.
5. group making can be seen as a project – in which doing and provoking violence serves as a strategy for creating a sense of groupness: “sometimes it’s a politics of seeking the worst outcome in the short run in order to bolster legitimacy and make sense of unity stronger” (page 13).
6. relation of groups and organizations – main protagonists of most ethnic conflicts are not “ethnic groups” but organizations working in the name of an ethnic group – states, terrorists groups, paramilitary formations, political parties, churches, newspapers, etc. Brubaker emphasizes that organizations are usually protagonists, but often are not targets, of conflict and violence.
7. framing and coding – if protagonists of ethnic violence are organizations, then we can ask how those conflicts become signified as ethnic. Brubaker writes that interpretation, framing and narrative encoding of events make conflict and violence ethnic (national, racial). Explanations of why violence happens, what “greater role” it serves, and whether/how it should be done/endured create an “ethnic frame” of conflicts.

8. ethnicity can be seen as a tool for cognition – author reminds that ethnicity, nation, race are not things “in the world” but perspectives on the world. These perspectives include implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge, and theory of the world, as well as systems of classification and categorization which ascribe specific kind of order to the world.

The author writes that social scientists should approach ethnicity and groups in this manner for at least five reasons. Firstly, sensitivity for framing dynamics can reveal cynical use of ethnic framing as a mask for clan/cliue/organization interests – and alert to “the risk of overethnicized or overly groupist interpretations” (page 18) of conflict and violence. Second, groupist rhetoric should not be mistaken for real groupness, for real things-in-the-world. Then, we should be aware that leaders are not the group – their statements are made in the name of the group, but should not be seen as group statements (not least because they often reflect interests of a leader clique). Fourth, sensitivity for dynamics and fluidity of groupness places focus on crystalization as well as on declining of groupness – which have the potential to explain many different contemporary situations. Fifth, Brubaker argues that we should emphasize intra-ethnic mechanisms which generate and sustain putatively inter-ethnic conflict, in order to more comprehensively understand what happens in situations of ethnic conflict.

Finally, Brubaker gives a description and offers an interpretation of ethnic relations in Cluj, a small town in Romania. Brubaker emphasizes that in order to understand those relations it is necessary to follow not Hungarians and Romanians, but how, where and in what context categories of “Hungarian” and “Romanian” are being used, and what meanings are being ascribed to those categories.

