Ethnicity
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Ethnicity is commonly used to distinguish differences in cultural values, beliefs, and traditions among groups from different geographical and/or national origins who may also differ in phenotypic features. The values, beliefs, and traditions that define ethnicity are passed between generations and create unique characteristics of that ethnic group, setting it apart from other groups. The environment shared by ethnic group members, the society that governs it, and the group members themselves affect the way these values, beliefs, and traditions develop and change over time.

Recent increases in international migration leading to increased ethnic diversity around the world necessitated a clearer understanding of ethnicity. Ethnicity plays an important role in research and policy; this construct has been used to identify different groups and to compare and contrast them with each other. However, the understanding and application of the term is inconsistent across different disciplines. Researchers and policy makers often use ethnicity interchangeably with race or culture, and they tend to confound the meaning of these terms. As a result, there may be inaccurate interpretation, generalization, and application of research findings, or inconsistent application of ethnic categories within the public policy realm. For instance, in the United States, the national census categories for ethnicity are different from those often used by school districts in preparing their performance reports (i.e., School Accountability Report Cards).

Therefore, to use ethnicity accurately in research and policy, it is important to understand how ethnicity differs from and relates to culture and race. Race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably when discussing demographics and comparing different cultural, racial, or ethnic groups. Race is a socially-constructed and controversial set of categories based on the phenotypic features of a person, such as facial features, skin color, or eye color; thus, researchers have come to use ethnicity as a substitute for race. However, an important distinction between race and ethnicity is that ethnicity is race and culture. Ethnicity extends beyond the physical features of a person; it also includes values, beliefs, and traditions. People who may be classified differently along the dimension of race may have the same ethnicity, and vice versa. For example, people belonging to the ethnic category of Latinos/Hispanics in the U.S. census may be racially Black, White, or Asian.

Culture is another concept that is used interchangeably with ethnicity; although these constructs are related, they are not the same. Culture describes traditions, values, and behaviors shared by people and transmitted across generations. Culture is not constrained to one specific race; people of different racial groups can share the same culture. In sum, ethnicity is a complex set of categories that does not rely solely on physical features (race), but also takes into account shared history, nationality, and values (culture).

The construct of ethnicity is important in psychological research because it allows researchers to look at individual and group differences as a function of a person's ethnicity (i.e., a person's phenotypic features and culture). However, researchers often misuse the term, and they also often incorrectly measure ethnicity. Researchers in various fields, including psychology, often assess ethnicity by simply asking people how they self-identify ethnically, without administering other measures that examine the values and beliefs that also make up ethnicity. Information gained
from such self-identification measures can be misleading because people often would identify their race (i.e., categorization based on phenotypic features), which is different from ethnicity. In addition to asking open-ended, self-identification questions, researchers may provide racial categories from which their participants choose, and this method also fails to measure the cultural aspect of ethnicity. Thus, when researchers report ethnic differences, they actually might be reporting racial differences. To capture how ethnic groups differ from each other, researchers should go beyond asking people to self-identify and examine how they understand their ethnic group membership, how they relate to the ethnic group and the superordinate or national group, and level of adherence to the norms and values of the ethnic group.

Understanding ethnicity is integral to cross-cultural research in psychology. It allows researchers to better compare different groups and understand how they are different from each other. Knowing the similarities and differences among race, culture, and ethnicity allows researchers to accurately use these terms in research. However, understanding and applying the term ethnicity is complicated; it is not easy, and requires consensual understanding of when and how to use ethnicity, not just in research but also outside of psychology.

SEE ALSO: Cultural Identity; Culture; Identity; Race; Racial Identity

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