

Ethnicity and Ethnic Discrimination in Schools: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Mahmoud Mobaraki

Ph.D. Student, Linguistics Department, Faculty of Humanities, Tarbiat Modares University, Iran
E-mail of the corresponding author: mmobaraki@rocketmail.com

Abstract

Educational classes address profound social, political, cultural and economic issues of ethnicity. The social teaching Program in schools includes some thematic units that introduce some important ethnic groups. These units include educational values and critical thinking; reading literature; culture, perception and communication; issues of ethnicity. In this article, we discuss the thematic unit “issues of ethnicity” in order to identify some of the challenges facing classes in which ethnicity is a major topic. We distinguish explicit (“old”) and implicit (“new”) forms of ethnic discrimination, arguing that implicit forms of ethnic discrimination require a discourse analytical approach to analyzing ethnicity. We believe that this approach offers provocative opportunities for class discussion of ethnicity and ethnic discrimination.

Keywords: ethnicity, ethnic discrimination, educational classes, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Although the readings vary in their content and focus, they comprise a complex and well integrated set of readings, which, taken together, spell out key ideas about ethnicity. These ideas may be summarized as follows: (a) ethnic categories (e.g., Kord, Lor, Fars, Balouch, Tork, Arab) do not stand up to empirical scientific investigation. That is, ethnic categories are inherently arbitrary, as evidenced by the fact that scientific efforts to establish ethnic categories result in multiple and contradictory groupings, even when genetic criteria are used. Indeed, ethnic differences are scientifically so unimportant that the very concept of “ethnicity” has little or no scientific validity. (b) Nevertheless, explicitly racist and ethnocentric programs such as the eugenics movement in the United States and Nazism in Germany have distorted science in order to justify repression and violence against racial and ethnic minorities. To undermine such movements and reduce ethnic discrimination, scientific education should focus on the speciousness of the concept of ethnicity. (c) Implicit in the readings is an understanding of ethnic discrimination as a belief system about the relative value of different ethnic groups, usually with “Fars” at the pinnacle of an ethnicity hierarchy. Within this perspective, anyone can be an ethnocentric, if they believe that one ethnic group is superior to others. (d) Viewing ethnic discrimination as a belief system about ethnicity places empirical evidence, logical argument, and education at the center of anti-ethnocentric efforts. Hence the authors appropriately focus on the scientific analysis of ethnicity.

2. Literature Review

The related literature reveals the irrationality of racist and ethnocentric ideology by pointing out the weak scientific basis for the concept of ethnicity and the genetically negligible differences among races and ethnic groups. But the argument contains a danger in its logic: If we argue that discriminating against people on the basis of ethnicity is wrong because the concept of “ethnicity” does not have biological reality, does it follow that ethnic discrimination may be justified if ethnicity were a biologically salient category? As early as 1963, Mayr, one of the most important developers of contemporary ideas about evolution, aptly addressed the problem: Equality in spite of evident nonidentity is a somewhat sophisticated concept and requires a moral stature of which many individuals seem to be incapable. They rather deny human variability and equate equality with identity. Or they claim that the human species is exceptional in the organic world in that only morphological characters are controlled by genes and all other traits of the mind or character are due to “conditioning” or other nongenetic factors . . . An ideology based on such obviously wrong premises can only lead to disaster. Its championship of human equality is based on a claim of identity. As soon as it is proved that the latter does not exist, the support of equality is likewise lost (Mayr, 1963, p. 649).

Mayr’s point becomes clear if we look at gender. While biologists may consider ethnic categories to be scientifically irrelevant, all biologists agree that the male-female distinction is biologically salient. The differences between men and women are systematic, and such differences are found at genetic, biological and even neurological levels. Does that make sexism more reasonable than ethnic discrimination?

Pinker (2002) argues that the case against ethnic discrimination and sexism is a moral stance that does not depend on the biological sameness of people:

The case against bigotry is not a factual claim that humans are biologically indistinguishable. It is a moral stance that condemns judging an individual according to the average traits of certain groups to which the individual belongs. Enlightened societies choose to ignore race, sex and ethnicity in hiring, promotion, salary, school admissions, and the criminal justice system because the alternative is morally repugnant. Discriminating against people on the basis of race, sex, or ethnicity would be unfair, penalizing them for traits over which they have no control. It would perpetuate the injustices of the past . . . rend society into hostile factions and [it] could escalate into horrific persecution. But none of these arguments against discrimination depends on whether groups of people are or are not genetically indistinguishable (p. 145).

The real problem of ethnic discrimination does not lie in ethnic categories. However flimsy the concept of ethnicity may be, human beings continue to perceive ethnicity, although that in itself is not a problem. The fundamental issue is how we use ethnic categories in our social lives. It may be justifiable and beneficial for a forensic anthropologist to use racial or ethnic categories when identifying a decomposed corpse, but using ethnic categories to limit access to education or jobs is not. The key idea is that equality does not require identity, and differences need not and should not translate to inequality.

Still, debunking quasi-evolutionist ethnocentric ideology by pointing to the falsity of its claims has its own value. False claims made under the guise of science need to be refuted not just in science but in popular discourse. However, debunking a specific ideology is not sufficient for countering ethnic discrimination, because ethnic discrimination is, like humans, omnivorous. Extreme forms of ethnic discrimination, such as slavery, violence, and segregation laws, are also relatively infrequent today, and such acts are rightly recognized as inhumane and criminal. Yet ethnic discrimination persists, because there are always new ideologies generated to fuel ethnic discrimination, whose form also changes over time. Today, forced sterilization and the legal denial of civil rights have been replaced by new forms of racism and ethnic discrimination, called “symbolic racism,” “everyday racism,” or “new racism” (Barker, 1981); these forms of ethnic discrimination are supported by new, subtle ethnocentric ideologies. One challenge for class discussion of ethnicity and ethnic discrimination is to develop a framework for understanding these new ideologies and new forms of ethnic discrimination.

Implicit forms of ethnic discrimination often emphasize alleged aspects of minority cultures, such as reliance on welfare, low school achievement, drug use, violence, and affirmative action, which, it is believed, come together to form pathological cultures that are distinct from “mainstream” Fars culture. A central characteristic of these implicit forms of ethnic discrimination is that they are usually not called “ethnic discrimination” at all (see Barker, 1981; van Dijk, n.d.). Instead, the view of minority cultures as pathological is allegedly based on observation of reality and commonsense knowledge about minority groups. Sociological, linguistic and cultural “facts” are called upon to support such views. For example, in the latest of his controversial best-sellers, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, Samuel Huntington (2004) offers socio-cultural reasons why recent Latino immigrants in the United States are (he claims) much less likely to speak English than European immigrants of the past: Latinos speak a common language, unlike earlier European immigrants who were linguistically diverse; Latinos are residentially segregated in the U.S. Southwest and a few major cities where Spanish is a working language; Latinos are much less interested than past immigrants in cultural assimilation; and Latinos are controlled by activists who encourage their cultural distinctiveness and maintenance of Spanish. Huntington believes that Latino immigrants’ alleged insistence on speaking Spanish is incompatible with the “American dream,” which he considers to be the core of American national identity: “There is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English” (p. 256).

3. State of the Problem

While many social scientists (e.g. Alba, Rumbaut & Marotz, 2005) have demonstrated that the central claims of Huntington’s argument are in fact empirically wrong, the popularity of Huntington’s work suggests that its “Anglo-Protestant,” English-only ideology (which is not empirically testable) is widely held and politically popular. But is Huntington’s work “racist or ethnocentric”? Rather than developing from a single ideology, ethnic discrimination persists through different ages, feeding on whatever ideologies are available at the time. With the demise of explicit forms of racism like eugenics and Nazism, we need a framework for analyzing ethnicity and ethnic discrimination that students can use to examine work such as Huntington’s. Is such work ethnocentric? Why or why not? What do we mean by “ethnic discrimination”?

The understanding of ethnic discrimination as a belief system about an ethnic group superiority does not explain why ethnic discrimination persists long after societies have dismissed the idea of ethnocentric

superiority. Indeed, students in class discussions routinely recognize the difficulty in defining ethnic discrimination and in determining what constitutes ethnocentric practices. A productive direction for discussion of ethnicity is to focus on how ethnic discrimination is expressed, why it persists, and what its social value may be. These questions place discourse rather than scientific argument or empirical data at the center of attention. By focusing on discourse, we shift attention away from scientific facts about ethnicity to ways of “ethnicity practicing,” and their social implications – that are, to the content and forms of texts and talk that are produced and circulated in the society, and the way such communities of practicing are linked to actual social practices.

4. A Discourse Analytical Approach to Ethnicity and Ethnic discrimination

One of the most influential theories of racist and ethnocentric discourse is that of van Dijk (1990, 1993a, 1993b), who works within the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which he prefers to call “critical discourse studies.” CDA does not refer to a specific method of analysis, but instead is an interdisciplinary academic movement of scholars who are committed to social and political activism, or who adopt a critical perspective toward public discourse (van Dijk, n.d.). CDA is particularly appropriate for class discussion in the educational system because it encourages the application of critical thinking to everyday social life by examining discourse in society: how discourse is produced and interpreted, and what function the discourse serves in society (Gee, 1999). While various methodologies are employed in CDA, an informal, qualitative discourse analysis does not require specific knowledge and skills. Introducing CDA by encouraging students to collect and critically analyze newspaper articles, selections from television and video, and other discourse data can help raise students’ awareness of ethnic discrimination as an ongoing social problem, not as an atrocity of the past that is on its way to a natural extinction.

5. Key Concepts in CDA

If CDA is to be used in class, we must first have a basic notion of how CDA can contribute to understanding ethnicity and ethnic discrimination. In this section, we introduce some useful ideas from van Dijk’s general theoretical framework on discourse, racism or ethnic discrimination, and society. A key focus is “social representations” of individuals or groups as “black,” “white,” “Asian,” or other ethno-racial categories. The reason for calling them “social representations” is that they are shared beliefs, values, norms, attitudes, and ideologies that one needs to have in order to function as a competent member of society. Social representations influence individuals’ understanding of specific, personal experience. For example, imagine a Fars middle-class individual in a park in Tehran observing a mother and child walking together speaking Kurdish. This particular, specific event becomes part of personal experience and memory, but that experience and memory are fundamentally shaped by the observer’s “social knowledge” about Kurd people. In this case, the event might register as a case of “Kurd people holding on to Kurdish and refusing to learn or speak Persian, the language of Fars group.”

One type of social representation is stereotypes, which are a central concern of CDA. The social representation of Kurd people as “holding on to Kurdish and refusing to learn or speak Persian” may be considered a stereotype. Stereotyping is often viewed as a form of “categorization”; the difference between stereotypes and other categories is usually considered to be a matter of accuracy or legitimacy. In this view, categorization is a necessary and natural part of human cognition, but sometimes it “goes too far,” resulting in an exaggerated, distorted or overly negative representation (i.e., a stereotype). From this perspective, stereotypical representations are overly broad categories – unfortunate, but understandable, and they can be corrected through education and information.

In contrast to this view, van Dijk, like Pickering (2001), argues that stereotyping is a particular and distinctive form of social cognition. In everyday life, human beings use categories to understand the world and to act in it. Usually these categories are not fixed, but somewhat flexible; they can be modified as needed, and new categories can be formed on the basis of new information. Stereotypes, on the other hand, are fixed, and they severely limit the formation of new categories. For example, ethnic stereotypes can persist despite clear scientific evidence that they are false. Moreover, Pickering (2001) points out those stereotypes have certain social value that mere categories do not:

Stereotyping may operate as a way of imposing a sense of order on the social world in the same way as categories, but with the crucial difference that stereotyping attempts to deny any flexible thinking with categories. It denies this in the interests of the structures of power which it upholds. It attempts to maintain these structures as they are, or to realign them in the face of a perceived threat. The comfort of inflexibility which stereotypes provide reinforces the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed (p. 3).

In other words, the social function of stereotypes is that they help to maintain existing social relations. In the example of “Kurd people holding on to Kurdish and refusing to learn and speak Persian,” an important question is how this stereotype is embedded in a broad system of social inequality. From this perspective, ethnic discrimination is not a system of beliefs about one group’s superiority over another, but a system of group dominance: a system for reproducing unequal social relations that sustains the advantages and privileges of the dominant group. A corollary is that ethnic discrimination can only be practiced by dominant groups. Although some individual members of subordinate groups may espouse a belief in their own superiority, such beliefs are not “ethnocentric” unless they are part of a larger social system that sustains a social hierarchy in which the group is privileged. This perspective enables us to examine ethnic discrimination as a broad social problem that permeates many societies.

To summarize: Social groups are composed of people who share a set of representations (which may be competing and contradictory) and who use them as a basis for interpreting the meaning of events in life and the world in general (such as a mother and child speaking Kurdish or the effects of immigrants on society). These social representations influence how people interpret individual events, talk, and text. Ethnic discrimination is a system of group dominance that includes a social dimension (everyday discriminatory practices, such as school segregation and ethnicity profiling), as well as a cognitive dimension (such as stereotypical representations).

To understand the persistence of ethnic discrimination, we must ask: How are social representations communicated and shared? It is here that discourse becomes crucial, because discourse works as an interface that connects the social and the cognitive (van Dijk, 1990, 1993a). Social representations are acquired, communicated and reproduced through various forms of discourse, including peer talk, parent-child communication, classroom interaction, lectures and discussions in educational institutions, and mass media. Logical scientific argument is only one small component in educational discourse. In fact, not all forms of discourse are equally significant in their influence on social cognition. Van Dijk calls for special attention to the discourses produced by social elites, which are “groups in society that have special power resources [such as] property, income, decision control, knowledge, expertise, position, rank, as well as social and ideological resources such as status, prestige, fame, influence, respect, and similar resources ascribed to them by groups, institutions, or society at large” (1993b, p. 44). While elites may directly influence the actions of others (e.g., by making political decisions in government or executive decisions in a corporation), they also have significant power in shaping public opinion (van Dijk, 1993b). Scientists are one group of social elites, but their formal, written forms of scientific discourse (such as the readings about ethnicity in schools) play a relatively minor role in supporting or undermining ethnocentric social representations, since the reader of such texts read them only for passing school exams is very small compared, for example, to a national television channel which has every day audience.

Particularly influential elite discourse includes mass media and political discourse, which often overlap. Politicians appear frequently in the mass media, where they routinely define “problems” for others to discuss; in this sense, they establish social agendas. Although politicians often claim that their concerns are determined by average people, and indeed political talk and public opinion may have a limited reciprocal relationship, elites and the public are quite asymmetrical in power. What political actors say has great influence in shaping public opinion, as does the mass media that cover such political discourse (and more). Formal political debates, newspaper editorials, public speeches, and press releases are a few of the types of texts that comprise influential forms of elite discourse.

When we look at ethnicity in elite discourse, we need to keep in mind that explicit forms of ethnic discrimination and racism (“old racism” [van Dijk, n.d.]), such as violence, apartheid, and segregation laws, are rare. The explicit ethnic discrimination no longer has legitimacy in public discourse. Yet ethnic discrimination persists (often not termed “ethnic discrimination” at all), and is passed on (or “reproduced”) through more subtle forms of discourse. In other words, social representations of ethnic groups in Iran are no longer dominated by traditional ethnocentric representations; in their place are more subtle (and often “cultural”) stereotypes that are believed to be based on reality (e.g., “Kurd people hold on to Kurdish and refuse to learn and speak Persian”).

6. Using Critical Discourse Analysis of Ethnicity in the Classroom

What are the pedagogical implications of applying CDA to ethnicity and ethnic discrimination, understanding ethnic discrimination not as a belief system, but as a discourse that sustains unequal social relations of power? Three principles can guide lesson planning within this framework: (a) Students should undertake their own discourse analysis by locating and analyzing ethnic stereotypes and other representations. (b) Examples of elite discourse are particularly appropriate for analysis, and can be drawn from current events. (c) Examples for analysis should be drawn from more than one cultural context.

(a) When using CDA, the first step is to examine stereotypes and other representations. Take the representation of “Kurd people hold on to Kurdish.” What makes this a stereotype is that it is impervious to scientific argumentation. We can see the Kurd people in Tehran are shifting to Persian monolinguals by the third generation. Nevertheless, despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, the stereotype that Kurd people refuse to learn or speak Persian is widespread, as in Huntington’s book, and this stereotype is the basis for many policies, practices, and laws at any level of society. Such stereotypes are ethnocentric if they support the political, economic, and social power of Persian speakers and if they limit the power of Kurd people. For example, a widely adopted educational practice in the United States is to test Spanish-speaking children in subjects such as social studies and history in English only. A major rationale for this practice is that students must be encouraged to use English. Because the students are not given the opportunity to display their knowledge in these subjects in a language they know, they continue to be categorized as low achievers, and they are tracked into vocational education, special education, and low-achiever classrooms at a higher rate than they would be if their knowledge were assessed in Spanish-language tests (see Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Thus a stereotype about Kurd people will be the foundation for an educational practice if that marginalizes Kurd children in Tehran. In van Dijk’s terms, therefore, this educational practice is ethnocentric. Class discussion can focus on the connections between ethnic stereotypes and public policy, law, and practice, and on students’ views about ethnic discrimination as a system of social dominance.

(b) A second way to use CDA is to focus on elite discourse of current events. How is ethnicity represented in public discourse about current events? Imagine a situation in which two persons from different ethnic background (e.g. Fars and Kurd) want to take part in an election for being president of country. Perusing the votes, we’ll come to this conclusion that most of the Kurdish voters voted to the Kurdish candidate. This example raises the issue of “reverse ethnicism,” or ethnic discrimination among ethnic minorities. Implicit in the concept of “reverse ethnicism” is an understanding of ethnic discrimination as a set of beliefs about ethnic preferences which can be held by any ethnic group. Moreover, reverse ethnicism is often linked discursively with the idealized notion that ending ethnic discrimination means creating an “ethnic blind” society. (That is, ethnic equality means a total disregard of ethnicity, an idea that often appears in anti-affirmative action discourse.) What is lacking in this discourse of ethnicity is the CDA focus on power: The issue is not merely whether race or ethnicity is a motivation for actions such as voting for a particular candidate. In van Dijk’s terms, voting for Obama because he is black is not the same act as voting against him because he is black. Only the second action sustains an unequal social hierarchy of white privilege. Indeed, within the framework of CDA, “reverse ethnicism” is a non-sequitur, and an “ethnic blind” society is an unattainable ideal that serves to maintain existing social hierarchies and to discourage active measures to rectify social inequality.

(c) A third principle is that CDA in the classroom should focus on discourse samples drawn from different cultural contexts. The inequality in the occurrence of different cultural contexts induces ethnic discrimination. When all of the texts, which a student with Lori ethnic background reads, are about Fars ethnic group and he finds nothing about his ethnic group in school books, the ethnic discrimination will be induced.

7. Conclusion

Given the challenges of talking about ethnicity, adopting a scientific approach that focuses on empirical evidence and scientific investigation is appealing, particularly if it leads to the reassuring and “politically correct” conclusion that “ethnicity does not exist” and ethnic discrimination is therefore unreasonable and wrong. Yet if we claim that ethnicity does not exist, how do we engage with the powerful everyday experiences of ethnicism that are so fundamental to many people’s lives? How can we address ethnicism if we discard the concept of ethnicity? One possibility is to declare that ethnicism is largely a thing of the past, and that people who claim to experience ethnic discrimination are being overly sensitive. CDA offers a framework for analyzing this possibility by raising questions such as: On what basis can Fars students make statements about the experiences of Kurd students? Who decides whether a claim about one’s experience is legitimate? What are the social consequences of Fars students’ belief that they can judge the psychological “sensitivity” of Kurd students (or other ethnic minorities) they do not know? Most importantly, who benefits from this point of view? In seeking answers to such questions, we can apply critical thinking to our own discourses of ethnicity.

In discussions of ethnicity and in the educational effort to counter ethnicism, what truly matters is not what science says, nor whether people can be educated to not care about ethnicity. To stop talking or thinking in ethnocentric terms is not the same as achieving ethnic equality. Indeed, it is possible to create an “ethnic blind” discourse that sustains and reproduces ethnic inequality. In such a case, probing the content of the discourse in search of ethnic stereotypes would not be enough. We must also look critically at what the discourse does in the society, and, in turn, what we ourselves do by subscribing to such discourse.

References

- Alba, R. D., Nee, R. G. & Nee, K., (2005), "A distorted nation: Perceptions of racial/ethnic group sizes and attitudes toward immigrants and other minorities", *Social Forces*, 84, 899-917.
- Barker, M., (1981), *The new racism: Conservatives and the ideology of the tribe*. London: Junction.
- Gee, J., P., (1999), *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. London: Routledge.
- Huntington, S., P., (2004), *Who are we?: The challenges to America's national identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Mayr, E., (1963), *Animal species and evolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Neuman, S., B., & Dickinson, D., K., (2001), *Handbook of early literacy research*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Pickering, M., (2001), *Stereotyping: The politics of representation*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave.
- Pinker, S., (2002), *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. London: Penguin Books.
- van Dijk, T., (1990), "Social cognition and discourse", In G. Giles & R. P. Robinson (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology and language* (pp. 163-183), Chichester, Sussex: Wiley.
- van Dijk, T., (1993a), "Discourse and cognition in society", In D. Crowley & D. Mitchell (Eds.), *Communication theory today* (pp. 107-126), Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- van Dijk, T., (1993b), *Elite discourse and racism*. London: Sage.
- van Dijk, T., (n.d.), "New racism: A discourse analytical approach", Retrieved September 5, 2008, from [http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/New\(s\)%20racism%20%20A%20discourse%20analytical%20approach.pdf](http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/New(s)%20racism%20%20A%20discourse%20analytical%20approach.pdf).