4

A Constructionist Approach

In Patrick O'Brian's novel *Master and Commander* (O'Brian 1970/1990), Stephen Maturin, an early-19th-century surgeon in the Royal Navy, speaks these lines about his identity:

> The identity I am thinking of is something that hovers between a man and the rest of the world: a midpoint between his view of himself and theirs of him—for each, of course, affects the other continually. A reciprocal fluxion, sir. There is nothing absolute about this identity of mine. (P. 249)

Maturin was not speaking about ethnicity or race, but he might have been. Making much the same point, anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) long ago argued that both self-ascription and ascription by others are critical factors in the making of ethnic groups and identities. In other words, ethnic groups and identities form in an interaction between assignment, what others say we are, and assertion, who or what we claim to be (Ito-Adler 1980). This interaction is ongoing. It is, indeed, a "reciprocal fluxion," and there is nothing absolute about the process or the end product. Ethnic and racial identities and the groups that carry them change over time as the forces that impinge on them change and as the claims made by group members and by others change as well.

This is the essence of the constructionist approach that we outline in this chapter. That approach focuses on the ways ethnic and racial identities are built, rebuilt, and sometimes dismantled over time. It places interactions between circumstances and groups at the heart of these processes. It accepts

the fundamental validity of circumstantialism, while attempting to retain the key insights of primordialism, but it adds to them a large dose of activism: the contribution groups make to creating and shaping their own—and others'—identities. This constructionist approach also provides the conceptual foundation for the remainder of this book.

The Construction of Ethnic and Racial Identities

In Stephen Maturin's remark on identity, two key statements are especially relevant to ethnicity and race. First, in saying that "there is nothing absolute about this identity of mine," he underlines a point central to the circumstantialist account outlined in Chapter 3: that ethnic and racial identities are changeable, contingent, and diverse. The analysis of ethnicity and race therefore should pay close attention to how their forms and functions vary and how they change over time. For example, we might estimate the role that a given racial or ethnic identity plays in organizing the lives of human beings in a given situation. We might think of this in terms of the comprehensiveness of an ethnic or racial category. A comprehensive or "thick" ethnic or racial tie is one that organizes a great deal of social life and both individual and collective action. A less comprehensive or "thin" ethnic or racial tie is one that organizes relatively little of social life and action.

At the same time, a second statement in the Maturin remark points to one of the major shortcomings of the circumstantialist approach. Maturin describes his identity as "a reciprocal fluxion." Not only is it continually changing, but change occurs at the intersection of the claims he makes about himself and the claims others make about him. There is a reciprocal relationship at work between these two sets of claims. This reciprocity is missing from circumstantialism, which conceives ethnic and racial identities as largely hostage to external forces and conditions that in effect assign interests and identities to groups. Identities are made in the circumstantialist account, but not by the groups involved. On the contrary, circumstances do the work. Ethnic and racial actors may use their identities instrumentally in pursuit of their goals—this is one of the key points of circumstantialism—but they do little to shape, reinforce, or transform those identities. They simply exploit the identities that situations make available and useful.

These two variables—the comprehensiveness of an identity and the degree to which it is asserted or assigned—offer useful ways to distinguish among identities and to begin to approach the process of identity construction.

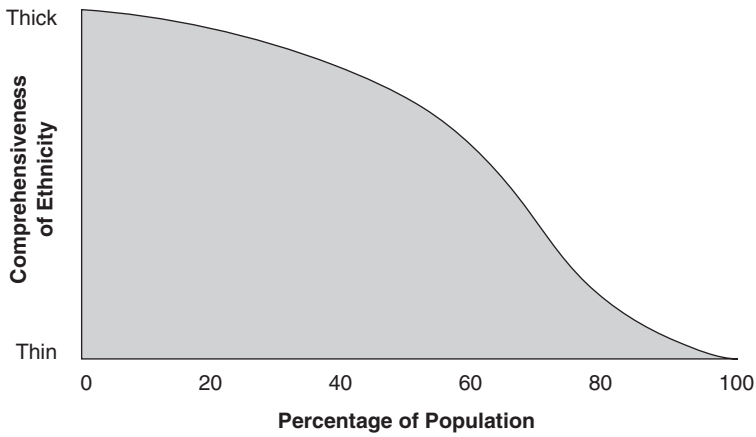## The Comprehensiveness of Ethnic and Racial Identities

Ethnic and racial identities vary significantly in the degree to which they organize social life and collective action. In South Africa prior to the 1990s, for example, race was a remarkably comprehensive aspect of social life. It was the organizing principle at the heart of most South African institutions—political, economic, and social. Everyone was assigned to a racial category, and that assignment determined whom you could marry, where you lived, how you were treated by the police, what your employment opportunities were, how much political power you had, and a great deal more. In short, racial identity was extraordinarily "thick": It dominated layer after layer of social organization with a comprehensiveness and power unmatched by any other dimension of individual or collective identity. Since 1994, however, the new, multiracial South African government has made a conscious effort to "thin" the role of race, to reduce the part it plays in organizing South African society.

For contemporary Italian Americans, ethnic identity is a much less comprehensive organizer of social life. They may claim this identity and express it in various ways, but being Italian American organizes much less of what they do and experience than racial identity does for South Africans. Ethnicity, for Italian Americans today, is a relatively "thin" identity. It does not lack significance; indeed, Italian Americans may attach great importance to it. Other dimensions of social life, however—perhaps race or class or gender or occupation or religion—tend to be more powerful shapers of daily life and experience and to play a larger role in what Italian Americans think and do.

This was not always the case. At an earlier time in the history of Italian Americans, soon after their arrival in the United States, this identity was much thicker, playing a much more comprehensive role in their lives. This is one of the ways that identities often change: Over time, they become more or less prominent as organizers of social life and action.

This pattern of change is illustrated graphically in Figure 4.1, which offers a stylized version of Italian Americans' ethnicity at two different points in their history. In both of the diagrams in Figure 4.1, the vertical axis refers to the comprehensiveness of the ethnic identity, the degree to which it organizes daily life and social relationships among Italian Americans. The higher one goes on the vertical axis, the thicker the ethnicity. The horizontal axis in each diagram represents the population of Italian Americans, divided into percentages, from 0 to 100. Time 1 is early in the history of Italian immigration to the United States, when most Italian

78   Ethnicity and Race
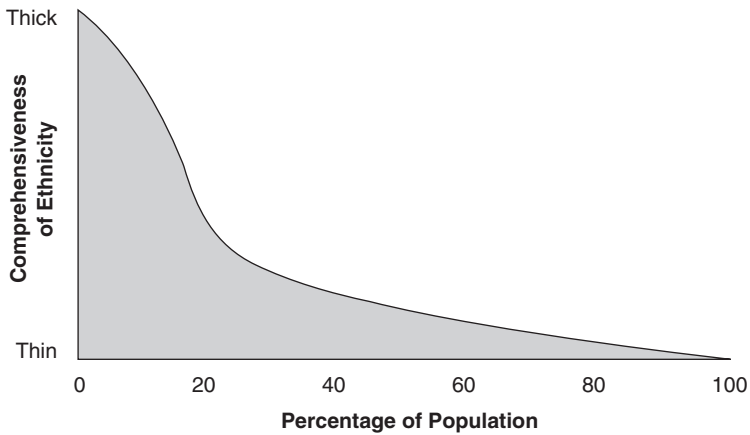
Figure 4.1   Historical Change in the Comprehensiveness of Italian American
Ethnicity (Approximate)

Americans were either first-generation migrants or their children. The Time
1 diagram indicates that at this point in their history, ethnicity was very
thick for a high proportion of Italian Americans; it organized a great
deal of their lives and actions and was central to their self-concepts. Only a
small proportion of the Italian American population experienced Italian
American ethnicity as thin—perhaps those who had been in the United
States the longest or those who came as individuals instead of as families,

settled some distance from other Italian Americans, and tried to mix quickly with the mainstream of U.S. society.

Time 2 is the present. Few first-generation Italian immigrants remain. Most Italian Americans are now of the third or fourth generation in the United States. Many have married non–Italian Americans; many are the children of these marriages. Few speak Italian. Decreasing numbers live in neighborhoods that are heavily Italian American. Most have become part of the economic, political, and cultural mainstream of U.S. society. As the Time 2 diagram shows, their ethnicity has thinned. At Time 2, far fewer Italian Americans experience their ethnic identity as thick. Most may still identify as Italian Americans and may do so proudly, but, in fact, that identity organizes little of their daily lives. For most of them, it has become the stuff of holidays and stories and old photographs (Alba 1985). To paraphrase Anny Bakalian (1993) on Armenian Americans, whose argument we reviewed briefly in Chapter 1, they have gone from being to feeling Italian.

Not only does this diagrammatic example illustrate historical change in the comprehensiveness of ethnicity or race, but it also suggests that substantial diversity may exist within a single ethnic population. Some portion of that population may experience their ethnic identity as very thick, while others experience it as rather thin, producing very different manifestations of a supposedly singular ethnicity. Furthermore, these portions change over time.

The change in Figure 4.1 reflects the assimilation that Italian Americans have experienced in the United States. Not all historical patterns of ethnic change look this way. Assimilation is by no means a necessary or even probable outcome of intergroup relations. Had Italian Americans, for whatever reason, been victims of systematic and sustained discrimination or violence or had they set out to isolate themselves from the mainstream and preserve distinctive cultural practices and a more powerful collective sense of self, the change in their ethnicity might have been nowhere near as substantial.

In some cases, change might even occur in the other direction, with ethnicity becoming not less but more important as an organizer of daily life. Native Americans offer a U.S. example. As we will see in Chapter 5, at the time Europeans arrived in the United States, the indigenous peoples of North America carried no single, all-encompassing identity. That did not prevent Europeans from viewing them as a distinct race. Over time, however, an awareness of the boundary between themselves and Europeans spread among Native Americans. Eventually, an American Indian or Native American identity became something more than a European perception. It not only organized European and later U.S. policy toward American Indians but also became a significant part of American Indians' own

80   Ethnicity and Race

Time 1: Mid-Nineteenth Century

Time 2: Late Twentieth Century
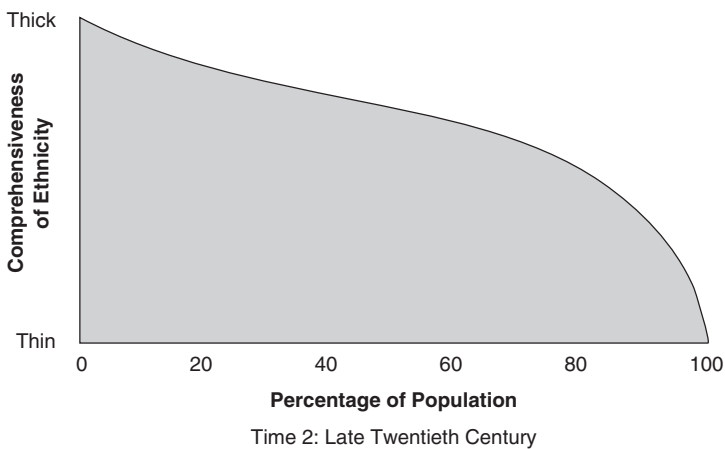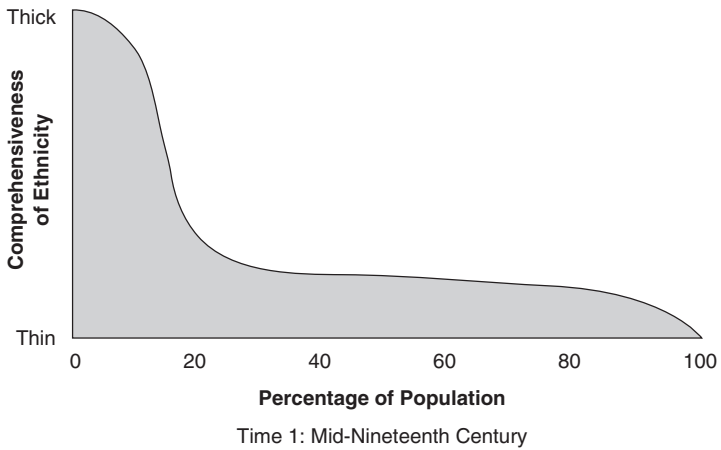
Figure 4.2   Historical Change in the Comprehensiveness of Hutu and Tutsi
Ethnicities (Approximate)

self-concepts and a basis of indigenous collective action. This pattern of
change is the opposite of the Italian American pattern.

Figure 4.2 provides a stylized illustration of the pattern of change in the
ethnic identities of the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda, whose story we told
in Chapter 3. This also moves in the opposite direction from the Italian
American one. At Time 1, in the middle of the 19th century, Hutu and
Tutsi identities had relatively little influence on the social lives and self-
concepts of Hutus and Tutsis. Kinship and residential bonds were much

more significant. By Time 2, late in the 20th century, certain changes—the centralization of Rwandan society under Rwabugiri, the rigidification of ethnic boundaries under the German and Belgian colonizers, and the more recent history of intergroup conflict—had made these identities very thick indeed. They had become matters of life and death for huge portions of the Rwandan population.

Why is an ethnic or racial identity thick in one context and thin in another? What drives the change? Circumstantialism is helpful in answering these questions. Its focus on social change; on groups' economic, political, and social positions; and on the interests derivative of these positions tells us a lot about how the comprehensiveness of ethnic and racial identities changes. The constructionist view of ethnicity and race not only shares circumstantialism's basic idea of fluidity—the idea that identities change in their nature and significance across time and situations—but also builds on circumstantialism's attempt to identify the specific factors that drive that change. Part of the meaning of "construction" is that ethnic and racial identities are not rooted in nature, but are situational precipitates, products of particular events, relationships, and processes that are themselves subject to change.

Assignment and Assertion

Circumstances, however, are not the only factors at work here. As Maturin's remark about his own identity suggests, groups themselves are involved in the dynamics of ethnicity and race. The Maturin statement highlights the importance of self-ascription. Ethnicity and race are not simply labels forced upon people; they are also identities that people accept, resist, choose, specify, invent, redefine, reject, actively defend, and so forth. They involve an active "we" as well as a "they." They involve not only circumstances but also active responses to circumstances by individuals and groups, guided by their own preconceptions, dispositions, and agendas.

In the 1990s, a number of scholars influenced by circumstantialism but eager to move beyond its limitations began to emphasize the responses that ethnic and racial groups make to the circumstances they face (for example, Conzen et al. 1992; Espiritu 1992; Leonard 1992; Nagel 1994, 1996; Sollors 1989; Tonkin, McDonald, and Chapman 1989; Waters 1990). These works focused their attention on the ways that ethnic groups construct their own identities, shaping and reshaping them and the boundaries that enclose them. Ethnic groups, in this account, may be influenced by circumstantial factors, including the claims that others make about them, but they also use the raw materials of history, cultural practice, and preexisting identities to fashion their own distinctive notions of who they are.

Joane Nagel's study (1996) of the resurgence of American Indian iden-
tity and culture since the 1960s is a good example of this approach. Nagel
began from the assumption that Native American ethnic renewal was made
possible both by broad trends in American culture and by changes in fed-
eral Indian policy. The success of the civil rights movement made ethnicity
both more valuable as a basis of organization and more valued by the soci-
ety at large. At the same time, the federal government extended to Native
Americans an increased degree of autonomy and self-governance. These cir-
cumstantial changes on their own would not have produced the particular
resurgence in American Indian ethnicity that came in the last few decades.
That resurgence, according to Nagel, could be fully explained only by look-
ing at how Indians themselves acted as they took advantage of these broad,
situational transformations. Through a number of both tribal and supra-
tribal activities—ranging from individual decisions to follow traditional
spiritual practices, to the holding of tribal and intertribal gatherings called
powwows, to the organization of political lobbies, to the establishment of
systems of tribal governance based on principles of self-determination—
Native Americans asserted their own emergent understandings of them-
selves. In the process, they revitalized both community and culture. The
resultant identities were not only products of circumstances; they were also
distinctive Indian creations (see also Cornell 1988).

Ethnic communities participate in their own construction and reproduc-
tion in many different ways. They may establish organizations, such as the
National Indian Youth Council in the 1960s or the American Indian
Movement in the 1970s in the United States. They may promote research
into ethnic history and culture, as in the endowment of Jewish Studies pro-
grams at American universities in the early part of this century or, more
recently, in the development of Asian American research institutes. They
may retell official histories in new ways that recognize and celebrate the
ethnic group and redefine its past and its relationships to others, as ethnic
Georgians did for two or three generations under Soviet rule. They may
reestablish defunct cultural practices or invent new ones, as in the revival of
the Gaelic language in Ireland or the invention of the African American
Kwanzaa holiday. In all these ways and dozens more, ethnic groups play a
creative role in shaping their own identities. These are not idle activities.
They variously elaborate, reinforce, glorify, specify, or otherwise add to the
identity that group members share. They may even affect its thickness. A
flurry of such activities may push that identity to the forefront of group
members' consciousness. It may encourage them to act in terms of that
identity and on its behalf, thereby making it a more comprehensive aspect
of their lives.

This creative role lies at the heart of a constructionist approach to collective identity, but it is not the whole story. The process of construction is an interactive one. Identities are made, but by an interaction between circumstantial or human assignment, on one hand, and assertion, on the other (see Ito-Adler 1980). Construction involves both the passive experience of being "made" by external forces, including not only material circumstances but also the claims that other persons or groups make about the group in question, and the active process by which the group "makes" itself. The world around us may "tell" us we are racially distinct, or our experience at the hands of circumstances may "tell" us that we constitute a group, but our identity is also a product of the claims we make. These claims may build on the messages we receive from the world around us or may depart from them, rejecting them, adding to them, or refining them.

This interaction is continuous, and it involves all those processes through which identities are made and remade, from the initial formation of a collective identity through its maintenance, reproduction, transformation, and even repudiation over time. Construction refers not to a one-time event, but to an ongoing project. As a result, ethnic and racial identities are constructed, but they are never finished.

It should be clear, then, that the constructionist account does not depart from circumstantialist claims about the fluidity and dynamism of ethnicity and race, nor from its claims about the critical role that context plays in collective identification and action. It adds to those claims a creative component, rescuing ethnicity and race from the prison of circumstance.

This interaction between external and internal forces is not the same everywhere. Circumstances sometimes play a larger or a smaller role. Until the last half decade or so, South African Blacks found themselves caught in a system in which both material circumstances and the claims that South African Whites made about them severely constrained their freedom to build their own identities. They had to struggle to assert and maintain an independent sense of who they were against both the apparent hopelessness of their oppression and the dominant group's power to promote its own ideas of Black racial inferiority through education, the media, and public expression. Some Black political activists in South Africa thought in just these terms, urging their own people to reject the group definitions of the South African regime and to assert their own radically different self-concepts (Gerhart 1978). Native Americans, on the other hand, by the 1970s faced a much less constraining set of circumstances, which allowed them significantly greater leeway in asserting their own conceptions of themselves and in helping them to alter the larger society's conceptions of them.

Boundary and Meaning

Whether assignment or assertion dominates the process of identity construction, two things are at issue: the boundary that separates group members from nonmembers and the meanings that are attached to the identities on either side.

Identity construction involves the establishment of a set of criteria for distinguishing between group members and nonmembers. These criteria can include skin color, ancestry, place of origin, a cultural practice, certain behaviors, or something else—or a lot of things at once. The point is not the specific criteria used as boundary markers, but the categorical boundary they signify—the line between "us" and "them."

Identity construction, however, involves more than marking boundaries. It also involves the assertion or assignment of meaning. Such meaning may take as simple a form as "we (or they) are good (or evil)" or "we (or they) are inherently superior (or inferior)." It may be far more complex, producing pride or exaltation or dismay or shame. For example, the hypothetical statement that "we are the people who survived a century of oppression but never lost our courage or our belief in ourselves" makes an assertion about the meaning of a particular "we." The statement that "those people are temperamental and incapable of governing themselves" assigns a meaning to a particular "they."

Both boundaries and meanings are changeable as groups variously respond to new circumstances or assert new ideas about themselves or others. Change in either one may alter, reinforce, undermine, or otherwise affect the identity of the group.

Identity construction typically involves both assigned and asserted versions of one or the other—or both—of these aspects of identity. The extent to which assignment or assertion prevails in identity construction generally depends on the ability of the group to promote or resist, both among its members and in the larger society, its own conception of boundary and meaning. Where substantial power to select boundary markers and impose meaning lies in the hands of outsiders or where circumstances have compelling effects on member understandings and interpretations, the identity is likely to be more a product of assignment than of assertion. Where outsiders' power is relatively less, circumstances are ambiguous, or the group has the ability to promote its own conceptions and mark boundaries itself, the identity will be more a product of assertion than of assignment. Few ethnic or racial identities are entirely the product of one or the other. Most are products of interactions between the two.

Diversity in Ethnic and Racial Identities

We have made two distinctions so far: one between "thick" or more comprehensive and "thin" or less comprehensive identities, and one between "more assigned" and "more asserted" identities. If we combine these, we have two axes of variation in ethnic and racial identities. One traces the degree to which an ethnic or racial identity organizes the social life of a people, and the other traces the relative importance of external and internal forces in the making and maintaining of both boundary and identity.
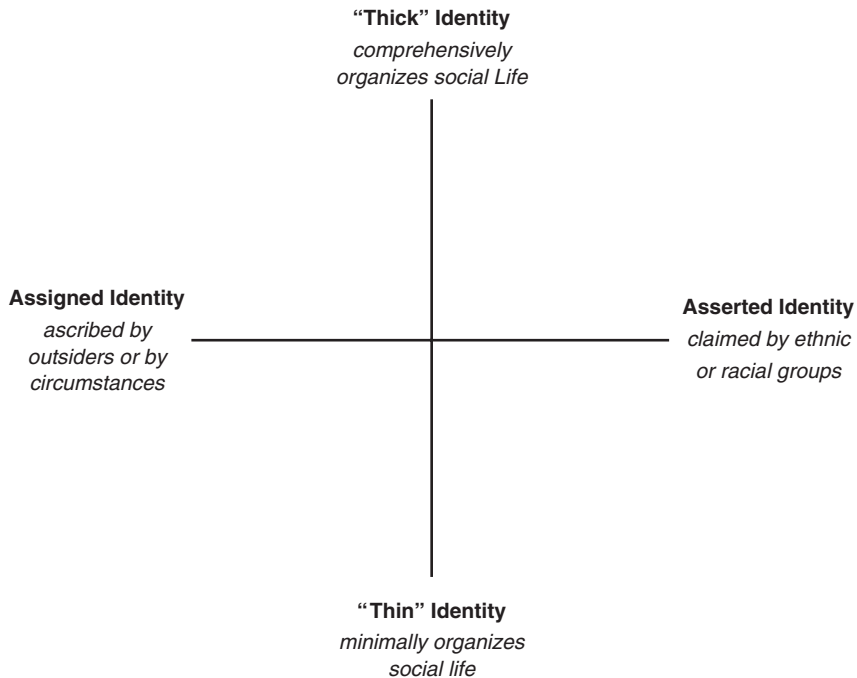
These two axes are presented graphically in Figure 4.3. We can place ethnic or racial identities at different points in the four quadrants described by the two crossed axes. For example:

- *Assigned and thick:* For a long time, Black South African identity was somewhere in the upper-left quadrant. South African Blacks were carriers of a racial identity assigned to them by dominant Whites. That identity organized virtually every aspect of daily life and action, and much of what Black South Africans did either reflected it or responded to it.

- *Assigned and thin:* Some recent Hmong immigrants to the United States from Vietnam and Laos carry an Asian American identity that can be found in the lower-left quadrant. They are assigned that identity by U.S. society, which often pays little attention to the differences among Asian groups. But many of them still organize much of their own lives in terms of their Hmong identity. Like some other Asian migrants who have come in the last few years, they still carry cultural practices from their home communities, maintain close interactions with each other, and speak their own language.

- *Asserted and thick:* One of the White ethnic groups in South Africa is the Afrikaners, to whom we will pay substantial attention in Chapter 5. Their identity can be placed in the upper-right quadrant. Both the boundary and the meaning of that identity are fiercely asserted by Afrikaners; it is a crucial part of their self-concept; and it organizes much of their life and action.

- *Asserted and thin:* Italian American identity began somewhere in the upper-left quadrant—it was the receiving society of the United States that insisted on the "Italian" designation—but over time it has moved toward the lower right. Today, it is increasingly an asserted identity, but it organizes less and less of daily life as Italian Americans have intermarried,

"Thick" Identity
*comprehensively
organizes social Life*

Assigned Identity
*ascribed by
outsiders or by
circumstances*

Asserted Identity
*claimed by ethnic
or racial groups*

"Thin" Identity
*minimally organizes
social life*

Figure 4.3   Two Axes of Variation in Ethnic or Racial Identity

moved out of ethnic communities, and entered the mainstream of American
society and culture.

We should note three important aspects of the classificatory scheme pre-
sented in Figure 4.3. First, individuals who carry more than one identity
might be represented in more than one quadrant at the same time. For
example, as Asian Americans, recent Hmong immigrants carry a largely
assigned and (for them at least) relatively thin identity, but as Hmong, they
carry a largely asserted and relatively thick one. Similarly, the children of
interethnic or interracial marriages might find themselves assigned one
identity, while they assert another. Alternatively, they may claim both
but organize most of their lives—friendships, relationships with parents,
cultural interests, and so on—in terms of only one. This four-part scheme,
in other words, does not classify groups or persons, but the identities
they carry.

Second, we might find various members of a single group in more than
one quadrant. Although the Asian American identity of recent Vietnamese
and Cambodian immigrants to the United States may be largely assigned
and thin, there are other Asian Americans—including some Vietnamese and

Cambodians, perhaps from earlier migrations—for whom that same Asian American identity is increasingly asserted and considerably thicker. As time goes on, Asian American identity becomes increasingly important in their self-concepts and organizes more aspects of their lives. For still other Asian Americans, that identity may fall elsewhere along these axes (Võ 2004). Similarly, for some Kurds in Turkey, late in the 20th century, Kurdish identity was claimed but thin; it was proudly held but organized relatively little of daily life, which was lived much as non-Kurdish citizens live. For others, in particular those involved in insurgency directed at establishing an independent Kurdistan or whose links to Kurds in Iraq were particularly strong, Kurdish identity was both proudly held and comprehensively experienced; it formed the foundation of individual and collective action and inspired extraordinary sacrifice, often to the point of death. For still others, Kurdish identity was largely assigned: They were identified by others as Kurds, but they sought to live outside that identity, organizing their lives largely in terms of other interpersonal bonds and identities (McDowall 1996). This sort of variation can be found among many groups (see, for example, Albers and James 1986; Cornell 1996; Esman 1983).

This diversity of identities within a single ethnic or racial group is important, for these are not the only identities, nor even necessarily the major identities, that people carry. Some may take little note of ethnicity or even race, whether their own or others'. Gender, religion, class, occupation, cultural group—these and other dimensions of social life likewise offer bases of personal and collective identification and are often powerful. Part of the analytical task is to understand when and why ethnic or racial identities become most prominent and powerful in social life and in the lives of groups.

The third point about Figure 4.3 is simply the possibility of change. As the Italian American, Asian American, and Rwandan cases that we have discussed illustrate, the "reciprocal fluxion" that Stephen Maturin spoke of may produce movement and change along either or both of these axes, with an identity starting in one quadrant and moving eventually to another.

The constructionist approach, then, sees ethnic and racial identities as highly variable and contingent products of an ongoing interaction between, on one hand, the circumstances groups encounter—including the conceptions and actions of outsiders—and, on the other, the actions and conceptions of group members—of insiders. It makes groups active agents in the making and remaking of their own identities, and it views construction not as a one-time event, but as continuous and historical. The construction of identity has no end point short of the disappearance of the identity altogether.

The Invisibility of Racial Dominance

When we teach courses on race and ethnicity, we sometimes begin by asking students to write a few lines about their own racial or ethnic identities and the impact of these identities on their lives. These reflections are often interesting, but certain replies always give us pause: those who say "I have no race" or insist that the only racial group they belong to is the *human* race. Sometimes this is intended as an act of resistance against racial categorization, but the majority of such reflections come from White students who seem unable to see themselves in racial terms.

Our students are not unusual. For many people, being White in America—or being a member of the dominant group in many societies, for that matter—is to occupy the unspoken, taken-for-granted category against which all others are defined (Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1989). Ashley Doane (1997) describes this as "hidden ethnicity." The description refers not to an effort by carriers of an identity to hide it from others, but to the fact that it often seems to be hidden from the carriers themselves who, like some of our students, seem unaware of the category they occupy or its comprehensive power.

Scholars from a number of disciplines have taken this up in recent years, analyzing the evolution of Whiteness as an identity and how some groups have been able to make their way into this privileged category, while others have not (Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991). These and other studies also examine the social consequences of Whiteness, both for those within its embrace and for those on the outside. They have focused in particular on how the invisibility of dominance both (a) naturalizes racial differences by implying that only persons who are not members of the dominant group have racial identities and (b) obscures understandings of the social inequities associated with race by blinding members of the dominant group to how the disadvantages of others work to their own advantage (for example, Hartigan, 1999; Lipsitz, 1998; Winant 1997). Doane (1997) in particular points out how the interests of dominant groups tend to be conflated with the interests of the nation.

But the paradox raised by our students' responses remains perplexing: Can a racial affiliation that is hidden or invisible be an identity? Yes, it can. Belonging does not require self-consciousness. One can belong to a collection of people distinguished by its position in relationships of power and privilege and by cultural commonalities among its members without any substantive awareness that this position and culture—and the identity embedded in both—are primary factors organizing life and experience. Indeed, one of the cultural commonalities of Whiteness is its interpretive deflection of issues of race and power, its capacity for unquestioning acceptance of things that,

viewed from the other side of the racial divide, are profoundly unsettling. Culture of this sort may not, as Craig Calhoun (2003) puts it, "admit to sharp boundaries" (p. 563), but it is in such commonalities of culture and position that groupness and identity reside (see also Lewis 2004).[1]

In many situations, however, including the United States, parts of Europe, Australia, and some other places, the lack of self-consciousness of Whiteness is changing. As the privileges and consequences of Whiteness have been documented and as Whites have become increasingly aware, in the context of intergroup conflict and tension, of how they, too, can be racialized and objectified, their racial self-consciousness has grown, and some have taken up the task of identity construction. Of course, many Whites have proudly claimed group identities for some time. In the United States, for example, the assertion of various White ethnicities—Irish, Polish, and so forth—has been common. The difference now is the claiming or reclaiming of an explicitly White identity and the struggle to control the meanings attached to it (Cornell and Hartmann 2004; Croll, Hartmann, and Gerteis 2006; McDermott and Samson 2005). For some, this unveiling of Whiteness has involved asserting the distinctiveness and value of White culture and, sometimes less consciously, a defense of the entitlements—cultural and material—of Whiteness (Berbrier 1998). For a few others, at least in the United States, the recognition and reconstruction of Whiteness has involved acting as "race traitors" (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996), disavowing and criticizing the inequities that have traditionally accompanied racial differences.

As these processes move forward, we are seeing Whiteness itself emerge not simply as a racial identity, but as an ethnic one, self-consciously asserted. We are also seeing that thick racial identities can be attached not only to minority or subordinate groups but also to persons and groups of privilege and power.

The Nature of Ethnic and Racial Bonds

We have considered the comprehensiveness of ethnic and racial identities and the relative influence of internal and external factors on the identity construction process. We have paid little attention thus far, however, to the nature of the bonds that hold group members together. We turn to those now.

Interests, Institutions, and Culture

At a minimal level, an ethnic or racial group is simply a self-conscious ethnic or racial category. Members know a boundary exists and see themselves as occupying one side of that boundary. In this minimalist case, they

attach no particular significance to the attendant identity. Such awareness alone has little power to shape action; it is simply another feature of the cognitive landscape. Identities have little influence on group members' actions until they involve more than simply the consciousness among members that they constitute a group. Although the bonds of awareness alone are weak, there are other bonds that may link group members to one another and create a more substantial and potent solidarity. Three such bonds are particularly important: shared interests, shared institutions, and shared culture (Cornell 1996; see also Spickard 1996).

- *Shared interests:* Some ethnic and racial identities are rooted largely in shared political, economic, or status interests. In many cases, what makes the ethnic or racial boundary important to group members is the interests that it serves, whether the pursuit of jobs, resistance to public policies that are seen as damaging, the protection of rights and privileges from the claims of other groups, or something else. To say that these identities are rooted in shared interests means that group members see themselves with common issues at stake and that this perception is fundamental to group identity and solidarity. Many ethnic identities originate just this way. For example, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and other Asian immigrant groups in the United States realized that they had certain political interests in common. That realization was a key factor in the emergence of an Asian American identity (Espiritu 1992; Võ 2004).

- *Shared institutions:* Groups whose members have common interests often organize in various ways to pursue those interests. They create more or less exclusive institutions: sets of social relations organized specifically to solve the problems group members face or to achieve their objectives. Such institutions may include everything from extended families to credit associations to educational systems to political parties. Group members are bound together in part by their dependence on and common participation in these institutions. Thus, for example, it is in part a set of Native American social service institutions in the city of Los Angeles that binds the members of the American Indian population there to one another, despite coming from perhaps a hundred different Indian nations throughout the country. Those institutions not only help group members solve life problems but also embed their Indian identity in organized sets of social relations (Weibel-Orlando 1991).

- *Shared culture:* Group members may also be bound to one another by their participation in a common culture. By this, we refer to a set of more or less shared understandings and interpretations that include ideas about

what is important and what is real as well as strategic and stylistic guides
to action. Such ideas and guides may be embedded in myths and stories,
expressed openly in ritual activity, communicated implicitly in extended
processes of socialization, learned through shared experience, or sustained
in other ways. They may not only provide conceptual interpretations of the
world at large and guides to action in that world but also specify and exalt
the identity of the group. What links group members to one another in such
cases is the perception that to a large degree they think alike, or at least
view aspects of their own lives and certain critical features of the world sim-
ilarly. For example,

> What do an Israeli farmer, a New York journalist, and a London businessman
> have in common? Nothing at all in terms of interests or institutions. Yet once a
> year they all say the same words at a Passover seder, and that ritual act—that
> piece of culture—binds them strongly together. Because they share culture, they
> all see themselves as Jews. (Spickard 1996:5)

Each of these—interests, institutions, and culture—offers a different poten-
tial basis of group attachments. Their potency varies. Interests are the thinnest
of the three, being most reflective of external circumstances. Bonds of inter-
est can be strong as long those circumstances are consequential and stable.
But when conditions change, the shared interests that bound people together
may change as well. Institutions tend to be a somewhat stronger foundation
of group identity because they embed that identity in sets of social relations
over which the group exercises some control. This is one of the reasons that
an ethnic group that has the apparatus of a nation-state behind it has so much
autonomy and durability. Their strength comes as well from the fact that they
not only offer a reason to act but also facilitate action. Culture tends to be
stronger still because, at its most elaborate, it involves a conceptual scheme
for making sense of the world. It is one thing to take up a new set of interests
or to turn to different institutions to solve life's problems, but it is quite
another to turn your back on an interpretive scheme on which you have come
to depend for an understanding of the world around you and your place
within it. Thus, the bonds of interest tend to be more volatile than institu-
tional bonds, and more volatile still than more elaborate cultural ones.

These bonds are illustrated graphically in Figure 4.4, using four hypo-
thetical groups. The relative salience of each kind of bond varies across
groups. Identity and solidarity in Group 1, for example, are based largely
on bonds of shared interests. The group has not developed significant insti-
tutional mechanisms for pursuing those interests, nor are members linked
to one another culturally by much more than their interpretations of their

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own position and the interests derivative of that position. Group 2 may
have built institutions on which it continues to depend, even as the interests
that motivated the building of those institutions attenuate. Meanwhile, we
might hypothesize that common participation in those institutions is begin-
ning to produce a set of shared understandings; the salience of shared cul-
ture in the collective identity of group members is rising. In Group 3, both
shared interests and shared culture are salient in sustaining the group's
identity, but the group is using institutions built by others—perhaps those
of the larger society of which the group is a part—to pursue its objectives.
In Group 4, all three kinds of intragroup bonds are playing significant roles
in collective identity. Interests are not the only things that link group mem-
bers to one another. Members also participate in exclusively shared institu-
tions and share an elaborate set of cultural understandings, symbols, and
traditions.

In other words, these different types of bonds are by no means mutually
exclusive. Furthermore, they are almost certain to change in salience over
time. Indeed, a single identity might fit several of these hypothesized pat-
terns at different times in its history. Generally speaking, although cultural
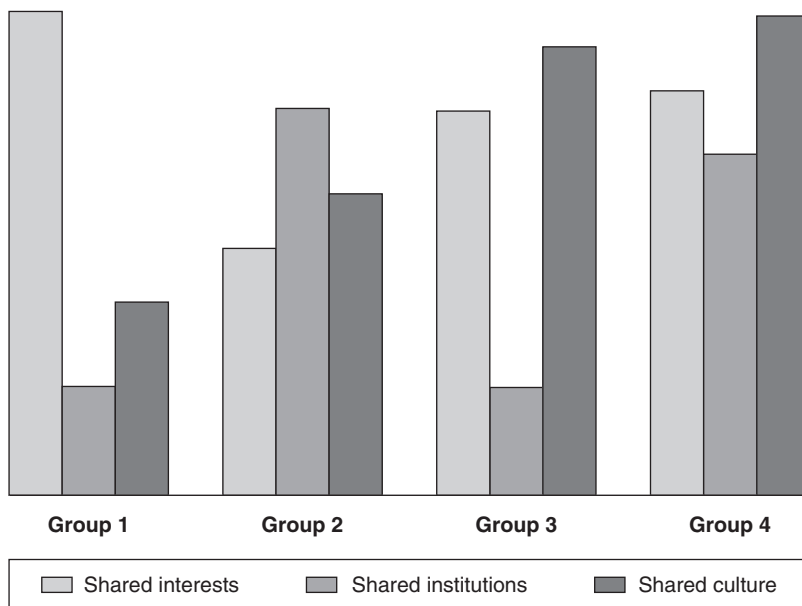
Figure 4.4   The Relative Salience of Intragroup Bonds in the Identities of Four
Hypothetical Groups

bonds tend to be more powerful than the bonds of shared interests or insti-
tutions, solidarity increases as these various kinds of bonds are combined.
In Figure 4.4, for example, identity in Group 4 is likely to be substantially
more durable than the identities in any of the other three. It has multiple
roots, increasing the tendency to act in terms of that identity, and those
roots have a high degree of salience in the life of the group. This also means
that its identity is significantly more comprehensive—thicker—than are the
identities of the other groups shown.

Thus, the constructionist approach to ethnicity and race focuses not only
on the factors promoting ethnic and racial identities but also on the kinds
of bonds those factors create. Identity construction involves, among other
things, the establishment and elaboration of very different links among
persons.

Constructed Primordiality

We have paid substantial attention in this chapter to the contributions of
circumstantialism, incorporating them into a constructionist approach. But
what of primordialism? Where does it fit in?

When groups and circumstances construct an ethnic or racial identity,
that identity is often claimed to have some set of primordial moorings—an
anchor in blood ties, common provenance, or the physical links of race—
no matter how thick or thin it may be in the practice of daily life or in social
organization. Even the thinnest ethnicities tend to be rooted in the kinship
metaphor, expressed through reference to common ancestry or origin, and
the assignment of race typically claims there is something natural about
racial distinctions. Such identities may organize little of life or a lot of it,
but in either case, they typically retain some of the significance commonly
attached to origins. This is a crucial source of the power of these identities.

Ethnicity and race, then, emerge as what we might call "constructed pri-
mordialities" (see Appadurai 1990; Griswold 1994:108). An essential
aspect of these identities is the fact that whatever their actual origins, they
are experienced by many people as touching something deeper and more
profound than labels or interests or contingency. This felt power, most
notable in the case of ethnicity, seems to be rooted in intimately shared
experiences and interactions, in the sense of connection to the past, and in
the quasi-mystical significance often attributed to blood ties. In the eyes of
many group members, this distinctive set of roots lifts ethnicity above
other identities as a defining feature of human communities and as a poten-
tial basis of action. "Peoplehood," "common origin," and "blood ties,"
whether asserted or assigned, form in most cultures a uniquely powerful set

of interpersonal bonds, but their power is not inherent. It lies in the significance human beings attach to them, a significance that is variable and contingent and altogether a human creation.

We recognize that the understanding of ethnicity we have just outlined presents a potential problem. As a student of ours once put it,

> So I know in my head that my ethnic identity is a product of history, of circumstances. But it doesn't feel that way. It feels much stronger than that. To me, it seems beyond circumstances or even the choices that I make. It just *is*. It's part of me, and always will be part of me. It feels as if I really don't have any choice in the matter.

Indeed, "constructed primordiality" seems to be a contradiction in terms. How can something primordial at the same time be a construction? And how can the idea a group develops about itself or that other people develop about it—a work, in part at least, of the imagination—arouse such feelings and carry such power?

The power of ideas should hardly be astonishing. At the extremes, plenty of people in human history have accepted physical agony or even death—or have visited both on others—in the name of one or another idea. What is often puzzling is the apparent disjuncture between abstract sociological arguments and the daily experiences, sentiments, and self-concepts of those whose lives have been most affected by ethnicity or race. On one hand are the readily demonstrable facts that identities come and go; they vary across space and time; and the forces that drive this variation and change are linked to historical events and to patterns of power and opportunity. On the other hand are the equally real and often more immediately experienced sentiments frequently attached to these identities: the sense of something deep and abiding in them, of a consciousness that defies choice or change.

This paradoxical situation has parallels with the theoretical divide between circumstantialist and primordialist perspectives. Circumstantialism often appeals to the mind, while primordialism captures the heart. The challenge, both for theory and for the interpretation of daily experience, is to reconcile the two.

Our constructionist approach is partly an attempt to answer this challenge. Seeing ethnicity and race as constructed primordialities provides a way both to bring groups as actors into the heart of these processes and to synthesize the insights of circumstantialist and primordialist approaches. To do so, we have had to abandon "pure" primordialism, arguing that much of the power of ethnicity and race comes not from anything genuinely

primordial, but from the rhetoric and symbolism of primordialism that are so often attached to them. A constructionism that does not take the primordial metaphor into account loses touch not only with how ordinary human beings in many cases experience their own identities but also with much of what is most potent, distinctive, and revealing about ethnic and racial phenomena.

The Problem of Authenticity

To say that ethnic and racial identities are primordial in only a symbolic or rhetorical sense is to invite a certain degree of skepticism or even outrage from individuals and communities who comprehend their ethnic and racial identities as primordial in the strictest, most literal way. For example, in 1989, an anthropologist named Allan Hanson published a paper titled "The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and Its Logic." The paper was, among other things, an analysis of a movement known as *Maoritanga* (Maoriness) or *Mana Māori* (Māori Power) among the Māori people, the indigenous people of New Zealand. Among the primary objectives of this movement, which has involved both Māoris and non-Māoris, are the reinvigoration of Māori culture and the creation of a more truly bicultural New Zealand, in which Māoris are on a political and economic par with *Pakehas* (the Māori term for New Zealanders of European descent) and in which Māori culture receives adequate respect. At the heart of the Māoritanga movement lie particular understandings of Māori history and culture, including beliefs about the arrival of Māoris in these southern Pacific islands centuries before Europeans even knew the islands existed.

In his paper, Hanson (1989), who favors Mana Māori, undertook an analysis of Māori understandings about the past and about their own traditions. He made a fairly convincing case that certain key stories, symbols, and events in the Māori oral tradition had origins in the works of early 20th-century Pakeha scholars, who were pursuing their own scholarly agendas. In effect, Hanson called attention to the socially constructed character of certain aspects of Māori identity.

Much to Hanson's surprise and dismay, his argument, which was reported selectively in the press, generated outrage and hostility in New Zealand, not only among Māoris but among local anthropologists as well. They interpreted his research as an attack on indigenous culture and tradition. For these groups, the suggestion that Māori identity was based in part on a myth, on an invented history, was not only an affront to their identity but also an attempt to undermine and discredit the very foundations of

Māori culture and community. The argument, they believed, suggested that their own, culturally rooted identity was somehow inauthentic.

Although this was not Hanson's intent, the reaction was not without some justification. There was a kind of sociological and historical debunking or deconstructing going on, as well as a deliberate provocation. As Hanson (1991a) later acknowledged, his (and others') use of the term *invention* was to some degree a rhetorical strategy, part of an attempt to open readers

> To a point of view that may lead them to understand cultural traditions and their authenticity as something quite different, more dynamic and complex, than they had previously thought. But it is also dangerous, because the word "invention" predisposes people to think that the author means one thing, while the overall text develops a different and much more subtle meaning. (P. 450)

As Hanson also recognized, such rhetoric poses other dangers. For example, ethnic political agendas may be undermined by the misimpression, encouraged by such terminology, that the group in question is merely an opportunistic creation, an invention for purposes of the moment (see Hanson 1991b and the discussion in Nagel 1996, chap. 3).

The attempt to uncover the complex foundations of an identity or culture is not necessarily an attack on authenticity. It may be just what it says it is: an attempt to see where that identity and culture came from, to plumb their complexities. Our own reading is that Hanson was interested in the ways in which cultures and collective identities are constructed, pieced together out of history, tradition, experience, myth, and a host of other sources. The result is no less authentic for being a construction. On the contrary, all cultures and collective identities are constructions of one sort or another; they are changed and reformulated—continually reconstructed—over time. This very constructedness is the source of their dynamism. It keeps them alive.

Furthermore, despite the fact that they are constructions, ethnic and racial ties are seldom, if ever, built on thin air. They are not complete fabrications. Their roots may vary from shared geographical origins to systematically discriminatory treatment at the hands of outsiders, from oral traditions that assert a common history to customary patterns of behavior that distinguish group members from their neighbors, or from ancient myths to present realities.

In Chapter 3, we briefly discussed the Yorubas of Nigeria as a classic case of the invention of an ethnic classification, in this case by colonial era missionaries. While there were no self-identified Yorubas at the time, the

missionaries were not inventing links where none existed. Many of the peoples who eventually would identify as Yoruba spoke the same or similar languages, shared similar styles of living, carried similar traditions, and organized their political systems by similar principles, but they did not see themselves as constituting a single people. The key to the development of Yoruba ethnicity was a political vacuum in the region in the early stages of the colonial era that allowed Protestant missionaries to promote an explicit, regional Yoruba identity based largely on linguistic commonalities. That identity eventually took hold among Yoruba speakers. Although Yoruba identity did not exist until it was invented by Europeans, it had very real roots in the lives of the people and eventually became the way they saw themselves (Peel 1989). Its origins by no means invalidate its authenticity.

The Yoruba case is far from unique. Colonial administrators in Africa often set up regional boundaries that departed from indigenous understandings of where appropriate boundaries lay. While those administrators often took preexisting kinship or linguistic affiliations into account, they tended to consolidate groups, putting previously independent peoples together in political units far larger than preexisting indigenous societies and then treating them as unitary (Horowitz 1985).

Many Americans have had their own problems acknowledging the social construction of identity, particularly in the case of race. Political scientist Adolph Reed (1996), after noting that "'race' is purely a social construction; it has no core reality outside a specific social and historical context," goes on to say that this point "typically elicits a string of anxious, incoherent yes-buts from people all over the official racial map, inside and outside of the academy, across the political spectrum" (p. 22). In Reed's view,

> The hesitancy about accepting race's contingency and fluidity shows just how thoroughly racialist thinking—which isn't just bigotry but all belief that race exists meaningfully and independently of specific social hierarchies—has been naturalized in American life, the extent to which we depend on it for our conceptual moorings. (P. 22)

Even popular cultural practices in America are infused with issues of racial authenticity. In a fascinating study of the blues music scene in Chicago, David Grazian (2003) has discussed how the desire to construct authenticity in racial terms for both tourists and regulars has consequences ranging from the racial composition of bands to the tiresome repetition of old standards that White audiences expect to hear. The fact that Americans don't even think about this and so often believe race to be a given indicates how successful the construction project has been.

That fact also indicates the extent to which, however they are con-structed, many ethnic and racial identities take on lives of their own. They are reproduced not by missionaries or European scholars or even, necessar-ily, by structures of inequality, but by their own taken-for-grantedness in the daily lives and conversations of the society. Reproduction has taken this form for the Yorubas, for the Māoris, and for races—including Blacks, Whites, and others in the United States. The best-constructed identities show the least evidence of their construction. Assumed and sometimes even celebrated by those who carry them and by the society at large, they come to seem natural. Those who doubt constructionism thereby illustrate its success.

Where, in all this, does authenticity lie? If an identity is keenly felt by those who carry it, does it really matter how it was constructed? Authenticity itself, after all, is a social convention. Some set of group mem-bers or outsiders selects a version of an identity and defines it as "authen-tic," granting it a privileged status. They then use it to distinguish among persons and identities, past and present. The grounds of supposed authen-ticity, however, are essentially arbitrary. Virtually every people in the world's history has engaged in some sort of contact and interaction with other peoples, visiting, trading, fighting, cooperating, dominating, submit-ting, and reproducing. They have traded not only goods but also words, ideas, practices, and genes. They have adopted what they found useful and ignored the rest. At what point in that long process of exchange and adap-tation have the cultures and identities involved been "authentic," and at what point did they lose their "authenticity"? We would argue that authen-ticity has been present either at every point or at no point, or simply when-ever "we" or "they" arbitrarily decide.

The key issue is not authenticity, but what kinds of identities in what kinds of situations organize human lives and motivate human action—and why (for more on authenticity and identity, see Taylor 1994:28–38). The Māori response to Hanson tells us one thing at least: Whatever the nature of Māori identity, that identity matters a great deal to Māoris, and they act in its defense. The important thing is to find out why and how that happens.

The Reconstruction of Circumstances

In the constructionism we are putting forward here, circumstances continue to play a central role. As the social world changes, identities change. Too often, however, the argument is left at that. Even when the efforts of ethnic and racial actors are taken into account, circumstance remains the ultimate

determinant of the identity-building process, with groups portrayed simply as responding within the constraints that external forces impose.

Identity, however, has its own impacts. Once established, an ethnic or racial identity becomes a lens through which people interpret and make sense of the world around them. It becomes a starting point for interpretation and, ultimately, action. If you were a female, poor, African American textile worker, for example, there are a number of ways you could see yourself. You might see yourself as all of those things at once. But you also might see yourself as first and foremost a woman or first and foremost an African American or first and foremost a worker—or perhaps as different things at different times. Regardless, the identity you claimed would have a profound effect on how you looked at the world around you and your place in it, on how you interpreted the actions of others, on your conception of your interests, and, ultimately, on your actions. Those actions, shaped by your conception of who you are, could, in turn, have an impact on the circumstances you face.

The same is true of collective identities. A group of people may come to see themselves in a particular way. In time, that self-concept may become embedded in their social institutions and cultural practices and become a constitutive part of how they view the world. That is, the identity, even if it had its origins in some assignment made by others, could in time become both asserted and thick. Once it does, it not only gains an inertia that may resist the further impacts of changing circumstances; it may also organize action in ways that transform the conditions that occasioned the identity in the first place. As we will see in Chapter 5, this is what happened to American Indians in the 20th century. At one time, most Native American identities were organized at the tribal level, but the federal government and other institutions of U.S. society, once they had confined Indians on reservations, generally dealt with them as a single population. In time, Native Americans saw themselves increasingly not only as tribal citizens but also as Indians. They began to develop supratribal, Indian institutions. They began to act politically and forcefully on an Indian basis. In the 1960s and 1970s, their political actions, built on an identity that a century earlier, very few Indians subjectively shared, altered the course of federal Indian policy. Thanks in part to these supratribal political assertions, the federal government returned increased power to Native American tribes. That power, in turn, contributed to a renaissance of identity and culture at the tribal level (Cornell 1988; Nagel 1996).

Ethnic and racial identities can be significant forces in their own right. Although circumstances can construct identities, identities are capable—via the actions they set in motion—of reconstructing circumstances. Some of

the most dramatic illustrations involve the ways global migration has transformed and expanded conceptions of citizenship (Joppke 1999) and of national culture in countries around the world. As a result of South Asian immigration, for example, food from the Indian subcontinent has become so much a part of cuisine in Great Britain that the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper complained that questions about it on high school exams were "too easy," part of the stock cultural knowledge of any British citizen (Sen 2006:26). Such identities, in other words, are not only products of circumstantial factors (among other things). At times, turning the tables, they produce new circumstances of their own.

This attention to the agency of ethnic or racial actors and to how their identities often shape their actions suggests the potential power of these identities. It recognizes as well that these identities may carry an intrinsic and irreducible significance, both for those who carry them and for the world at large. Some identities may be merely ways of organizing in pursuit of other interests—as, for example, when some persons organize along an ethnic or racial boundary in pursuit of class interests. But they are not necessarily so. They often are neither substitutes for nor reflections of other dimensions of social organization. They have a significance of their own, becoming not a dependent variable, but an independent variable in the logic of social change.

The Logic of Ethnic and Racial Construction

It remains for us to review the forces that occasion the construction of ethnic and racial identities, setting in motion their creation, maintenance, reproduction, and transformation. Four such forces are important: interests, meaning, happenstance, and inertia. These underlie the conscious and unconscious processes of construction by which ethnicity and race are born, persist, change, and disappear.

Interests

As we remarked in Chapter 3, there is often a utilitarian logic to ethnic and racial identification. When it is advantageous to draw a boundary between one set of claimants to opportunities or resources and another, ethnicity and race lend themselves admirably to the task. When there is a need to mobilize persons on behalf of their interests, the invocation of ethnic or racial bonds can be a powerful call to unity. Consequently, race and ethnicity are commonly called into play in situations of competition over

scarce resources: jobs, housing, school access, prestige, political power, and so on.

Following Richard Alba (1990), we can think of these two rather differ-ent occasions as having to do with social allocation—the allocation of resources among persons or groups—and social solidarity—persons acting together on behalf of shared purposes. Social allocation and social soli-darity are in some sense complements. When ethnicity or race is used as a principle of allocation, that fact encourages its emergence as a basis of sol-idarity. Groups that discover their identities are being used as grounds for major decisions about their lives and opportunities are more inclined to see those identities as important and to make them the basis of their own actions. Likewise, groups that are solidary are more likely to use the iden-tity that most clearly binds members to one another as a differentiator in allocating resources and opportunities, distinguishing, for purposes of allo-cation, between themselves and others. In either case, the action reinforces a boundary between "us" and "them."

Meaning

Not only material, political, or status interests are at stake in ethnic and racial construction. For some persons and groups, their sense of who they are and how they fit into the world around them may be at stake as well. In a book written more than half a century ago, sociologist Robert Nisbet (1953) argues that in the modern world, many human beings feel a pro-found spiritual insecurity, a sense of alienation from one another, and a disconnection from local communities. Nisbet claims, much as Max Weber does in the famous conclusion to his work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/1958), that behind this sense of meaninglessness lie the centralization of power in large organizations and the progressive bureaucratization of function and authority in most aspects of human life. These developments have weakened the traditional institutions—such as family and local community—that once provided most human beings with a sense of meaning and connection, linking them to each other in personal and consciously interdependent ways. Much of that connection is now lost. Whereas Weber seems to find such developments ultimately alienating and disempowering, Nisbet (1953) suggests that they have inspired efforts to find new sources of meaning: a quest for attachments that can "mediate directly between individuals and the larger world" of economic and politi-cal organizations and an often confusing moral life (p. 49).

While Nisbet makes no mention of ethnicity or race in this regard (but see Smith 1981), he is touching on part of the logic of ethnic construction. The

blessings of modernity are many, but the preservation of intimate, meaning-
ful communities has not been one of them. Ethnicity, with its sense of his-
torical continuity and its claims to deep—even primordial—interpersonal
ties, holds out the prospect of communion and connection, of a mediating
community between the individual and large, impersonal processes and insti-
tutions. If ethnicity does not deliver community in practice, it can do so at
least in the imagination. "The members of even the smallest nation will never
know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in
the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1983:15).
This remark, made originally about nationalism, applies to ethnicity as well.
It, equally, is a work of the imagination, and its emotional resonance comes
not from the material rewards it promises, but from the connections it makes.
Of course, not all ethnicities offer such resonances, but some find their logic
in just this sort of communion: a connection across social, geographical,
and—through the metaphor of kinship—even generational space. Looking
back, the ethnic imagination sees a blood legacy. Looking forward, it sees
survival in the continuing line of kinship.[2]

Happenstance and Inertia

Interests or a search for meaning actively drives the process of ethnic and
racial identity construction. But sometimes more passive factors play a role
as well. One is happenstance. *Happenstance* refers to circumstances that are
indifferent to the populations they affect. From the point of view of iden-
tity construction, things just happen to be this way.

For example, one way that ethnic boundaries receive reinforcement or
are undermined is through the distribution of positions in the economy.
Some distributions are intentionally fashioned. When employers in New
York City and elsewhere put signs in their windows in the mid-19th-
century saying, "No Irish Need Apply," or when Anglo workers organized to
exclude Chinese from jobs in California late in the same century, they were
intentionally denying certain opportunities to Irish or Chinese immigrants; in
so doing, they reinforced ethnic or racial boundaries on behalf of their own
interests. But sometimes circumstances alone accomplish the same thing.
When new immigrants arrive in a society, they may find that few jobs are
available to those who lack certain skills; they may also find they are too poor
to buy housing in all but a few neighborhoods or that only certain sectors of
the economy are growing fast enough to absorb them. Discrimination may be
absent in all these cases, yet the ethnic or racial boundary receives support
from the circumstances these groups encounter. They form ethnically homo-
geneous communities because it just so happens that impersonal residential

and workplace conditions sustain interactions within the ethnic boundary and discourage interactions across it. Ethnic bonds are supported not by shared interests or by a struggle to find or fashion meaning so much as by the shared experiences of daily living.

Happenstance may seem to give ethnicity in such cases a rather modest foundation, but experience can be a powerful source of collective identification, even when the resultant identity serves few pragmatic interests. Consider for a moment the often robust bonds that develop among others who have shared powerful and distinctive experiences: survivors of natural disasters, for example, or combat veterans. Ethnicity and race are built not only by the rational calculation of interests or the search for communion but also by the incremental contributions of small events that, over time, teach us to think of ourselves and others in certain ways. Interest-based identities are only as robust as the conditions from which the relevant interests are derived. In contrast, identities rooted in gradually learned ways of viewing the world gain an inertial force that may prove more long lasting.

The other passive force that can shape ethnic and racial construction is inertia. *Inertia* refers to the fact that people carry collective identities all the time. They experience social change or enter new situations with certain collective identities already in hand, the result of experience or socialization that leads individuals to see themselves as connected to other people—and, more important, as connected to categories of people. We are always conscious of sharing more with some people than with others, and the categories we occupy become part of our self-concepts. If those self-concepts are also embedded in established relationships, institutions, cultural practices, or ways of seeing the world, they gain considerable inertial force.

Consequently, people typically enter new situations or experience social change with collective identities already well established as interpretive windows on the world and potential bases of action. What we mean by inertia is that these are in a sense default identities: They are likely to continue to shape people's views and actions until new information or changed circumstances disrupt them and argue for something else. Until that happens, the identities we carry are likely to last, in part because they are the ones we have available, the ones that, for the time being at least, we cannot do without. In acting on the basis of those identities, we reproduce them.

Reframing Intergroup Relations

In Chapters 2 and 3, we reviewed the development, over half a century or so, of scholarly thinking about ethnicity and race, but we deferred discussion of

an important point. While ethnicity and race are closely related in certain ways, they have tended to produce divergent analytical strategies and concerns, or what we call *analytical frames*. We can think of these as different ways of framing and analyzing intergroup relations: (a) an *ethnicity frame* that privileges ethnic concerns and phenomena and develops analytical strategies reflecting that preoccupation and (b) a *race frame* that privileges racial concerns and phenomena and develops strategies reflecting that preoccupation. Not all scholarly work on these topics can be easily assigned to one frame or the other; nonetheless, a great deal of the work in this broad field can be loosely categorized this way, and the result has been two distinct, if sometimes overlapping, literatures addressing distinct, if often closely related, questions. These literatures have been in only intermittent communication with each other, yet each of the two frames has something of importance to offer to the other and to the study of intergroup relations.

They can be quickly summarized (see the more detailed discussion in Cornell and Hartmann 2004). The ethnicity frame dominated much of the early sociological work on ethnicity and race and, while less prominent today, continues to shape a good deal of work in the field. Rooted in studies of immigration and urban politics, its focus is on what happens to a group of people who share place of origin but then enter another society. Its primary target of analysis is not the society at large, but these entering populations, seen as ethnic groups. What happened to the Poles in America, for example, or the Irish, or the Jews? What's happening today to Mexican migrants? What kinds of communities do these new migrants form; how do they survive economically; what happens to the patterns of life they bring with them; what impact do they have on the society they enter; and what impact does the society have on them? Its orientation is implicitly comparative: Why do some groups follow one path and some another? How do different groups access and manage political power, especially in cities? Why do some assimilate and some not? The typical research methodologies in the ethnicity frame are community studies and the analysis of assimilation and mobility as measured by income, patterns of intermarriage, language use, and the like.

The race frame looks very different. A product largely of work done in the 1980s and 1990s but with roots that reach back to thinkers such as W. E. B. DuBois (1903/1986), C. L. R. James (1933/1992), and Frantz Fanon (1967), it is increasingly dominant in the sociological study of intergroup relations. Its primary unit of analysis is not the group, but the social system of which the group is a part, including transnational and even global systems of relationships. Whereas the ethnicity frame is implicitly comparative, the race frame is relational, focusing less on groups than on processes

such as migration, globalization, and development, on the ways power is organized and experienced in and through such processes, and on how racial categories and hierarchies are thereby constructed and reproduced. But its interest tends to be less in how groups of people imagine and realize themselves than in how different populations and social structures imagine particular racial "others" and organize racial difference. Rooted in studies of slavery and colonialism, "It conceives race as an organizing principle that is deeply embedded in culture and social structure and has profoundly shaped both intergroup relationships and society as a whole" (Cornell and Hartmann 2004:31).

Summarized this way, these two frames seem to be almost opposites, but they strike us as complementary. Each has strengths the other lacks. Our goal in this chapter has been not to choose one frame over the other, but to find ways to combine their strengths: the race frame's focus on social systems and transnational processes with the ethnicity frame's focus on localized group formation and agency; the race frame's more subtle and complex analysis of the power embedded in social systems and culture with the ethnicity frame's concern with the felt power of supposedly primordial identities and communities; and the race frame's emphasis on the racialization of social systems and culture with the ethnicity frame's emphasis on how such things are locally experienced, challenged, and sometimes transformed.

Race and ethnicity are not separate phenomena to be addressed by different analytical frames. As social categories and in common usage, both assume that human origins are uniquely powerful in determining what happens to social groups. While one privileges genes and the other privileges kinship, both claim to be in some sense "natural" categories, given by the circumstances of birth. At the same time and despite their essentialist pretensions, both are demonstrably social constructions, although the construction process lies largely in the hands of others in the case of race (assignment), largely in the hands of groups themselves in the case of ethnicity (assertion). And both, as objects and vehicles of identity processes, are bound up in power relations, albeit at different levels of the social system, with racial categorizations tending to be systemwide, while ethnic groups are typically rooted in local or regional processes. Crucially, however, these processes tend to operate hand in hand, each modifying the effects of the other.

Conclusion

A constructionist approach assumes that ethnic and racial identities vary across space and change across time. It assumes that societal conditions and

social change—the circumstances groups encounter—drive much of that dynamic. It also assumes that ethnic groups are actively involved in the construction and reconstruction of identities, negotiating boundaries, asserting meanings, interpreting their own pasts, resisting the impositions of the present, and claiming the future—but often doing so in racialized contexts and circumstances that both shape and are shaped by their actions. Neither actions nor circumstances alone create groups, for our actions depend on how we interpret circumstances, and circumstances, ultimately, are the products of human actions. Ethnic and racial identities are created, elaborated, and re-created in the interaction between the two.

A constructionist approach also assumes that the mutability of identity does not deprive it of power. The power of ethnicity and race lies in the significance we attach to them, both to our own racial or ethnic identities and to the identities of others.

In the chapters that follow, we add some flesh to these constructionist bones. We do so in two ways. In Chapters 6 and 7, we provide more detail on both contextual and group factors that play significant roles in the construction of identities. First, however, in Chapter 5, we explore several cases that illustrate some of the aspects of identity construction that we have described here.

Notes

1. Calhoun's thinking here comes from a spirited and informative debate with Rogers Brubaker over Brubaker and Cooper's (2002) critique of identity as a category of analysis.

2. We mention ethnicity and not race in this regard because this act of the imagination is a classically ethnic act. It is part of the process through which ethnic groups—regardless of what others say or what circumstances may imply—lay claim to meanings of their own.