



Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach. Baumann, Gerd, and Andre Gingrich, eds. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004. 219 pp.

NA'ILAH SUAD NASIR, *Stanford University*

Identity has long been a core concern for anthropologists, and is more recently a hot topic in education circles. Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich weigh in on how best to study and conceptualize identity in their edited volume, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. In this book, they put forth a model of thinking about identity that highlights the fact that identities are simultaneously about the groups that you belong to and about the groups that you do not belong to—about sameness and difference. After making the argument that prior approaches to conceptualizing identity have privileged either sameness or difference, they build on the work of anthropological forefathers Edward Said, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and Louis Dumont, to articulate three “grammars” of identity/alterity that systematize the study of the processes of selfing and othering. They use the term “grammars” broadly, referring to the language and ideas that people and groups use to establish and make sense of selfings and otherings. They are orientalizing, segmentation, and encompassment.

Orientalizing involves pointing out differences between your group and another, and incorporates two seemingly disparate processes—seeing one’s own group as superior, yet also romanticizing an aspect of the other group. Baumann describes this as “what is good in us is still bad in them, but what got twisted in us still remains straight in them.” The second process is segmentation. This is the idea that “the Other may be my foe in a context placed at a lower level of segmentation, but may simultaneously be my ally placed at a higher level of segmentation.” From this perspective, identity and alterity are a “matter of context, and contexts are ranked according to classificatory levels.” The final grammar, encompassment, is a process of “selfing by appropriating. . .or co-opting selected kinds of otherness.” For instance, a Christian group might argue that we are all Christians, and thus reinforce their own identity while implicitly subjugating others by emphasizing sameness.

After setting up this model, each author draws on this framework and their ethnographic data from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and national groups to understand/explain how these various grammars are used, spanning geography and



time, to create and maintain identities and differences. Considerable attention is also given to the way in which the use of these grammars is related to violence and genocide.

My own reaction to this volume is multi-layered. As an educational psychologist who studies identity, pays a lot of attention to context, and utilizes ethnographic approaches, I am always interested in new approaches to understanding identities in context. The first hurdle for me with this book, however, was the foreboding language in the title. I wasn't sure at first, if this volume was at all related to the issues that interested me. Once I understood that the authors were using the term "grammars" in the broad sense of social grammars and that they were not overly deterministic in their use of "structural," I was assured that the arguments they were making had broad appeal and relevance, and that what felt jargony to me was simply a grounding in a disciplinary-based approach.

This book's strength is two-fold. First, as an edited volume it was delightfully cohesive, with each author considering the same set of basic questions, and utilizing the three grammars as a frame for examining identity in their various contexts—contexts that range from pre- and post-war Germany, to Laos during the Vietnam War, to current-day strife in Cote de Ivoire, to boot camps in North America and Israel. The concern here is identities writ large—among whole nations and groups within nations. These multiple analyses, grounded in ethnographic data, offer the reader a deep understanding of the kinds of processes by which language is used to identity self and other, and how such processes can give rise to unthinkable violence and even genocide.

The second core strength for me is the fluid treatment of both structural and agentic aspects of identity. We see across the chapters that groups are both positioned by others and are proactive in defining and positioning themselves. Also important is the consideration of issues of power, hierarchy, and social status that become central to the selfing/othering processes.

The focus on identities broadly conceived by whole groups of people was also a bit of a weakness for me. I wondered if the framework might also be useful for studies focused more at the level of individual identities in order to better understand how individuals construct identities in the local contexts of their lives. This kind of analysis might be of particular relevance to educational anthropologists, to explore the intersection of race, ethnicity, and participation in schools.



I was also less convinced by the theorizing of the relation between the three grammars and violence/genocide. It was unclear for me whether the authors were arguing that violence was the outcome of the breakdown of the grammars—when they ceased to work—or whether the certain types of grammars preceded incidents of violence. Either way, they seem difficult arguments to support empirically, as the issues of causation here are quite complex.

Overall, however, I found this a stimulating volume and think it has much to offer for readers interested in better understanding identity processes.

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