

COMMUNICATING ETHNICITY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY

by

Laura L. Pierson

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PREVIEW

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Laura L. Pierson, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2006

Advisor: Dr. Ronald Lee

This dissertation uses phenomenology, along with a constructionist framework, to explore the ways an ethnic community in central Texas constructs and communicates its cultural identity. The first goal of this study (RQ1) was to describe how the people of Norse, Texas experience ethnicity. The second goal of this study (RQ2) was to discover how this ethnicity was communicatively constructed and maintained. The third goal of this study (RQ3) was to learn how the relationship between ethnic identity and communication contributes to the creation of shared meanings within the community. The fourth goal (RQ4) of this study was to describe the meaning(s) that the people of Norse attribute to the cultural practices that reflect their ethnicity. The fifth goal of this study (RQ5) was to discern how the people of Norse use language and communication to validate their identity. The first part of this dissertation is devoted to an explanation of how identity and communication are inter-related and dependent upon each other, the process of assimilation and its effects upon immigrants, ethnic revival, including among white ethnic groups, and other identity issues such as naming and land. Second, the ethnic Norwegian community of Norse, Texas is discussed. Third, phenomenology as descriptive framework, and the methods and procedures of the study are described. The

second part of this dissertation is devoted to the results of the study. Here, the cultural identity and the communication patterns of the people of Norse are discussed. The last two chapters are devoted to an analysis and summary of the study. Here, it is revealed that the people of Norse still strongly identify with their Norwegian heritage, and that they reaffirm this identity by sharing symbolic forms and by participating in cultural rituals with others. The most important of these symbolic forms and cultural rituals includes Christmas celebrations, *lutefisk*, and the Lutheran church, all of which are strong Norwegian cultural markers for the area. This section also discusses the marketing of ethnic identity to promote the area's cultural heritage as well as to bring in revenue for the community. Concluding the final chapter are the limitations and contributions of this study, and suggestions for future research.

PREVIEW

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**Dedicated to**

**Alan**

**“Jeg elsker deg.”**

PREVIEW

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The process of researching and writing a dissertation is an intensely personal endeavor, but it is also one which cannot be undertaken without a great deal of help from others. Without such assistance, I doubt I would have proceeded as far in this particular journey.

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*Ingen er barn av i dag,  
du er barn av dei tusen år,  
djupt gjennom lag etter lag –  
røtene går.*

-Knut Hauge

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Background/Context: Identity and Communication	1
Ethnicity Defined	5
Ethnicity and Assimilation	10
Assimilating Immigrants	14
Questioning the Assimilation Model	18
Ethnicity Revived	20
White Ethnicity	22
Other Identity Issues	25
Naming and Identity	26
African Naming Traditions	30
Australian Naming Traditions	31
Chinese Naming Traditions	32
Islamic Naming Traditions	33
Jewish Naming Traditions	33
Native Alaskan Naming Traditions	36
African American Naming Traditions	37
Graffiti Artists' Naming Traditions	39
Land and Identity	40
Research Objective	42
Research Questions	43
Contributions of This Study to the Discipline of Communication	44
Preview of Dissertation	45
II. THE COMMUNITY: NORSE, TEXAS	47
Introduction	47
Norwegian Capital of Texas	47
Original Homesteads	49
Immigrant Churches	51
Our Savior's Lutheran Church	52
The Old Rock Church	53
Historical and Cultural Sites	54
Bosque Memorial Museum	55
Clifton College	56
Visitors	56
King Olav V	57
TV2 Norway	58
Norwegian Society of Texas, Bosque County Chapter	58

	Society Celebrations	59
	Norwegian Country Christmas Tour and <i>Lutefisk</i> Dinner	61
	<i>Smørgåsbord</i> Dinner	64
	Summary	65
III.	PHENOMENOLOGY	67
	The Interpretive Paradigm	67
	Constructionism as Worldview	69
	Phenomenology	73
	Assumptions of Phenomenology	77
	Differences from Traditional Ethnography	80
	Methodological Approach	82
IV.	METHODS AND PROCEDURES	84
	Introduction	84
	Investigator's Experience	84
	Setting	86
	Participants	88
	Research Procedures	88
	Data Collection Techniques	88
	Ethical Considerations	98
	Data Analysis Procedures	99
	Verification Procedures	100
V.	"A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH:" ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NORSE, TEXAS	102
	Introduction	102
	First Generation Immigrant Identity: Strangers in a Strange Land	103
	Ethnic Enclaves	105
	Endogamous Marriages	109
	Norwegian Church Services	111
	After-Church Family Suppers	115
	Norwegian Summer School	118
	Norwegian Christmas Traditions	120
	<i>Lillejulaften, Julekveld, and Jul</i>	120
	<i>Julenek</i>	123
	<i>Julebukking</i>	124
	Ethnic Tensions	126
	Letters Home	129
	Second Generation Immigrant Identity: "Americans" Under Construction	132
	Language Use	133
	Norwegian	133
	Use Among the Elderly	134
	Use for Concealing Inappropriate Topics	138
	Use as Small Talk, or for Certain Words	141

English	150
Higher Education	155
Exogamous Marriages	157
Third Generation Immigrant Identity: Transatlantic Patriots	160
Kingly Visit	160
Renewed Ethnic Interest	164
Coming Home	166
Inspiring Others	173
Genealogy	174
Historical Restoration	176
Pride and Humility	179
Summary	186
 VI. “BEHIND THE SCENES ETHNICITY:” COMMUNICATING NORWEGIAN HERITAGE IN NORSE, TEXAS	 187
Introduction	187
Family Communication	188
Local Lore	196
Immigration Stories	197
Reasons for Choosing Texas	203
Native American Stories	206
Civil War Stories	209
Good Samaritan Stories	213
What Do These Stories Reveal?	215
Naming as Communication	217
The History of Norwegian Naming Practices	218
Name Use in Norse, Texas	221
Surnames	222
Maiden Names	224
Given Names	226
Terms of Endearment	228
“Ethnic” Pets	228
What’s in a Name?	230
Norwegian Pilgrimage	233
Texas Hospitality	241
Cultural Forms and Symbols	245
Rituals, Customs, and Activities	250
Some Unique Examples	253
Reunions	256
Christmas Celebrations	260
Christmas Eve Candlelight Services	264
Norwegian Cookies	266
Norwegian Country Christmas Tour	268
<i>Lutefisk</i> Dinner	271
<i>Smørgåsbord</i> Dinner	278
Church	282

Lutheranism	282
Cemeteries	287
Church in Norway	290
Preparing Future Generations	293
Summary	300
 VII. COMMUNICATING ETHNICITY IN NORSE, TEXAS	 301
Introduction	301
Identity and Communication	303
Norwegian Cultural Markers in Norse, Texas	309
Christmas Celebrations	309
<i>Lutefisk</i>	315
The Lutheran Church	319
Norwegian Ethnic Identity in Texas Today: Communicating Personal Identity and Marketing Civic Pride	323
Summary	344
Post Script	347
 VIII. CONCLUSION	 349
Summary of Dissertation	349
Limitations of Research	356
Putting the Results into Perspective	358
Directions for Future Research	360
 REFERENCES	 363
 APPENDICES	 451
A: Texas Map with Bosque County Highlighted	451
B: Bosque County Map	452
C: Norse Map	453
D: Texas House and Senate Resolutions	454
E: Pastors of Lutheran Churches (ELCA) in Norse area	456
F: Hymns	458
“Built on a Rock”	458
“Children of the Heavenly Father”	460
“The Church’s One Foundation”	461
“Faith of Our Fathers”	463
“From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”	464
“I Am So Glad Each Christmas Eve”	465
“I Know of a Sleep in Jesus’ Name”	466
“A Mighty Fortress is Our God”	467
“Who is This Host Arrayed in White”	469
G: King Olav V’s Speech	471
H: <i>Lutefisk</i> Dinner Menu	473
I: <i>Smørgåsbord</i> Menu	474

J:	Prayers	475
K:	Pronunciation Guide for Norwegian Letters	476
L:	Glossary of Norwegian Terms	477
M:	Norwegians' Interview Protocol	485
N:	Sample Page from Norwegian's Transcript	491
O:	Non-Norwegians' Interview Protocol	492
P:	Sample Page from Non-Norwegian's Transcript	495
Q:	Consent Statement	496
R:	Photographs	498
	17 Original Norwegian Immigrants	498
	Pierson Homestead, Mid-20 <sup>th</sup> Century	499

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I seek to address the inter-related nature of identity and communication. More specifically, I investigate how ethnicity is constructed and communicated in a small Texas community. To introduce this research project, I start with an overview of the relationship between identity and communication. Then I outline ethnicity, emphasizing its relationship with assimilation and immigration, its revival, and white ethnicity, and I also include sections on other identity issues such as naming and land. Later in this chapter, I present my research objectives and research questions, describe the contributions of this study to the discipline of communication, and preview the remainder of the dissertation.

#### **Background/Context:**

##### **Identity and Communication**

The notions of identity and communication, both complex issues in and of themselves, are inter-related and dependent upon each other (Abrams, O'Connor, & Giles, 2002; Collier, 1997; Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Shepherd, 2001). They each influence the other, and both are crucial to the study of ethnicity. In this section I discuss the relationship between identity and communication, and then a section on ethnicity follows.

The words “communication” and “community” both arise out of the same Latin root word *munia*, “where the reciprocal giving and mutual service that takes place in communication works to make a common people, or *communis*, a community which is

bound together through gifts of service” (Shepherd, 2001, p. 30). It is through communication that people give something of themselves and interact in a variety of communicative contexts, whether these contexts be interpersonal, familial, small group, public, or organizational (Littlejohn, 1996).

Although similar in meaning, “community” and “identity” are not identical terms. “Community” refers to a “macrolevel social phenomenon” on the level of a larger “environment,” and “identity” alludes to a “microlevel social-psychological phenomenon” which occurs at the level of an individual’s worldview. Communities, though, offer the social frameworks necessary to create and sustain identities (Primeggia & Varacalli, 2000, p. 245; Lie, 2003).

Culture is the overarching concept that embraces both notions of community and identity. Culture is associated with race and ethnicity; the former being related to physiognomy, and the latter to more esoteric elements, such as “traditions, peoplehood, heritage, orientation to the past, religion, language, ancestry, values, economics, and aesthetics” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 46; Collier, 1997; Eisenstadt, 1995; Ellis, 1999; Lie, 2003; Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1999; Petersen, 1997; Song, 2003). Identity is formed when individuals align themselves with particular social structures associated with race or ethnicity and then communicate ideas about who they are to others. In this process, identity is continually being clarified, deliberated, and reformulated (Abrams et al., 2002; Collier, 1997; Hecht et al., 2003; Lie, 2003; Martin, 1997; Spivey, 1997; Wood, 1997).

This type of constructed identity is symbolic and is centered around a set of cultural forms and symbols (Abrams et al., 2002; Lie, 2003). In fact, these cultural

forms and symbols are what ethnic groups use to distinguish themselves from other groups (Ellis, 1999). Both meanings and behavior are significant, so “identities function symbolically to convey the meaning of the cultural group and to establish uniqueness” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 60). Ethnic identity is situated around a very particular set of cultural forms and symbols, and thus, it communicates uniqueness and solidarity to the outside world (Lie, 2003; Martin, 1997). Social behaviors, such as holiday celebrations, cultural rituals, and food customs [referred to as the “last bastion” of ethnicity by Steinberg (2001, p. 63)], can also be viewed as an enactment of ethnic identity (Ellis, 1999; Hecht et al., 2003).

Among the people of Papua New Guinea, for example, the social behaviors of sports and gambling have replaced war and trade. These new behaviors serve as “a framework for communication between groups,” for it is through these collective rituals that individuals see themselves as part of a larger group and are able to interact with others outside of that group. Social contexts influence identity, and vice versa. By participating in sports and gambling, the people of Papua New Guinea create their own groups and establish boundaries between themselves and others (Gustafsson, 1998, p. 175).

Because identity is dynamic and continually renegotiated (Collier, 1997; Martin, 1997; Spivey, 1997; Wood, 1997), a community’s language or discourse, especially that which references their identity, is a critical component of identity (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 57). Communication scholars, then, study meaningful cultural forms and symbols (i.e., forms of communication) as a way to better understand a particular group. Since these forms and symbols “find their public character in interaction, behavior, and all kinds of

acts,” they are directly observable forms of symbolic communication (Lie, 2003, p. 44; Collier, 1997).

For example, there are few words in the Chinese language that directly describe or communicate emotions. A person speaking Chinese does not pointedly say how she or he is feeling; rather, she or he employs the use of “body-rooted idioms” to convey shades of emotions. The Chinese word for “heart” – *xin* – is combined into a number of phrases to indicate the personal and ethical dimensions of a particular situation. The listener understands the individual’s emotions based on how the word *xin* is used with other phrases. For example, the Chinese word for sorrow is *shang xin*, or “the heart is wounded,” and to be discouraged is *hui xin*, or “the heart has turned to ashes” (Tung, 2000, pp. 69-70). In this example, body-rooted idioms in the Chinese language reference Chinese identity, and indeed, become part of that identity. Studying these cultural forms and symbols and their use offers insight into Chinese ethnic identity.

Other examples of the link between identity and communication can be found in the African American community. According to Jack L. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman (1976), elements of the traditional African world view, such as harmony, natural rhythms, non-linear time, and the balance between the spiritual and material, can be witnessed in contemporary African American communication, and are, in fact, the foundation of such communication. The rhetorical resolution of artificial conflicts, called “playing the dozens” (Garner, 2004), and black street speech (Baugh, 2004) are also examples illustrating how a group’s cultural forms and symbols construct identity.

The relationship between identity and communication can also be studied by observing the cultural forms and symbols found in the mass media. These media outlets

highlight the symbols that groups use to establish identity and to distinguish themselves from others. Turkish television programs in Amsterdam, for example, serve not only as a source of information and entertainment, but also as an ethnic identifier among a minority immigrant group (Ogan, 2001). Cummings (2004) also cites the changing image of blacks on television as an indicator of evolving attitudes about black ethnicity and the role of African Americans in contemporary American society.

While the inter-related nature of identity and communication is well understood, some scholars voice concerns for future research. Shepherd (2001) states that constructing a distinct identity in contemporary society may seem more difficult than before due to the challenges that communication brings, adding that people need to believe in “the possibility of communication” in order for them to form such an identification (p. 33). In addition, Abrams et al. (2002) claim that “[t]he influence of communication on ethnic identity...is often overlooked given the focus on individual processing, which fails to address the creation of shared meanings among group members” (p. 234). This distinct identity, or ethnicity, is discussed in the following section.

### **Ethnicity Defined**

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the United States has experienced major changes in its ethnic makeup. As a result, “ethnicity” has once again become a major topic of interest, both in academics and in the popular culture (Song, 2003).

In their seminal work, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (1970) assert that ethnicity has become more important for self-definition and

other-definition because the emphasis on occupational identities has faded. They also suggest that international events and religious beliefs have less of an impact on identity as they once had in the past, and that groups are beginning to redefine themselves on the basis of common culture and descent. People, according to these authors, are more frequently using ethnicity, rather than other factors, to construct their identities.

But what exactly is ethnicity? The term is difficult to define, and no one generally accepted definition exists. In general, an “ethnic group” is a smaller, unified group living within a larger society. This group is unified by a shared ancestry, recollections of a shared history, and a focus on certain symbols which help solidify the group’s identity. Such symbols include, but are not limited to, kinship, geography, religious beliefs, language (Song, 2003), traditions, values, peoplehood, and economics (Martin et al., 1999). Petersen (1997) also describes an “internal sense of distinctiveness” and an “external perception of distinctiveness” as essential to membership in an ethnic group (p. 33). Members of a particular ethnic group also share the same values and participate in the same activities and cultural rituals (Colliers, 1997; Ellis, 1999; Petersen, 1997). According to Eisenstadt (1995), these components help build and strengthen boundaries between groups.

Barker and Galasiński (2001) outline three “markers of ethnicity” to facilitate defining the term. These markers are all points of reference used by individuals while engaged in discourse about themselves, their community, or their ethnicity. The first marker is a *personal reference*, where anthroponymic terms (i.e., ethnic labels) and personal pronouns (i.e., we, they) are used. These terms imply a personal relationship, or a perceived similarity with others. The second marker is a *spatial reference*, where

toponyms or geonyms (i.e., names of places) are used, and “spatial reference [is] constructed through persons” (i.e., “with us”). In this sense, familiarity is constructed through the use of identifiers of place. The third marker is a *temporal reference*, where prepositions (i.e., then) and “adverbs of time” (i.e., long ago) are used to create a sense of history and/or heritage within a group (p. 126). By identifying themselves with others through personal, spatial, and temporal references, individuals create a sense of shared ethnicity and community with others.

According to Reminick (1983), ethnicity “may be considered the largest social grouping in which sentiments are evoked and identity formed in the context of a primary group structure through the vehicles of particular symbols” (p. 2). Ethnicity is a distinctive marker of a group’s communal legacy, which is shared and passed down through the generations (Banks, 2002). In addition, the group’s members are conscious of their membership within that group (Ellis, 1999; Song, 2003). This identity, then, “is the source of people’s meaning and experience” (Berry & Henderson, 2002, p. 4).

Although usually central to ethnic identity, shared ancestry is not always a necessary component. Song (2003) argues that it is the “group’s belief in its common ancestry and its members’ perception and self-consciousness that they constitute a group which matter, and not any actual evidence of their cultural distinctiveness as a group” (p. 7). According to Petersen (1997), ethnicity consists of “ties that transcend kinship, neighborhood, and community boundaries” (p. 32).

Membership in an ethnic group implies inclusion, and hence, social identity. By interacting with others in the same group, an individual can learn the concepts and communication patterns that differentiate that group from others. “Ethnic groups are

symbolized, and individuals identity as members of them, by engaging in specific expressive patterns that are acquired in communication interaction” (Ellis, 1999, p. 146).

This identity can have varying degrees of significance (Song, 2003), a situation to which Steinberg (2001) refers as a “crisis of authenticity” (p. 63). These identities may be either “thick” or “thin” in nature. A “thick” identity suggests that an individual or group strongly relates to the culture of the home country. This person or group continues to celebrate old-world customs, speak the home language, and many times live in communities with other immigrants from that country. In other words, these people’s lives are dominated by aspects of their ancestral homeland (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998).

Cornell and Hartmann (1998) illustrate this “thick” identity at work in their example of pre-1990s South Africa. In this society, a person’s ethnicity determined whom s/he could marry, where s/he lived, and what jobs that person was eligible to work. In this case, ethnicity “dominated layer after layer of social organization with a comprehensiveness and power unmatched by any other dimension of individual and collective identity” (p. 74). In other words, a person’s ethnicity defined her/his life and thus forced that individual to identify strongly with that ethnicity.

A “thin” identity suggests that an individual or group may still be aware of and celebrate ethnicity superficially, but that no real direct ties to the homeland exist. Marriage outside the ethnic group, loss of the home language, and a wider geographic base all contribute to the dilution of ethnicity for these people. In a sense, they more or less blend into the larger American cultural landscape. Some individuals in this group may still proudly identify themselves as being from a particular ethnic group, but their

ethnicity has shifted to a more symbolic role. They have moved from *being* an ethnicity to *feeling* an ethnicity (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Song, 2003; Steinberg, 2001).

Contemporary Italian Americans provide a good example of “thin” identity (Alba, 2000b; Primeggia & Varacalli, 2000). In this case, ethnicity plays a much smaller role, if any, in the organization of social life. Many individuals within this community may be aware of and celebrate their ethnicity, but it does not determine the outcome of their lives. Italian Americans can and do marry outside their ethnic (and religious) group, move away from their families and communities, and take jobs not traditionally associated with their ethnic group. This is not to say, however, that ethnicity is without importance for these people. For many Italian Americans, their ethnic identity may not permeate their everyday lives, but it is still significant to the formation of their identity as a whole, albeit at a reduced level.

As social creatures, humans must interact to form their ethnic identity. People ignore differences and strive to fit better in a communication sense. Individuals use their communication to construct and negotiate their own identities (Ellis, 1999; Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Song, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999). This line of reasoning goes against the earlier assumption that ethnicity was a primordial aspect of our selves, occurring naturally in each individual (Geertz, 1963, 1973; Higham, 2002). This notion of ethnic primordality has been further criticized for assuming that identity is static and unchanging over time, and for being “culturally essentialist” (Song, 2003, p. 7; Martin et al., 1999). Instead, Ellis (1999) suggests that

a better way to examine ethnic groups is as the outcome of social interaction. The emphasis is not on the supposed unvarying content of ethnic groups, or some final

list of objective qualities of a group. The emphasis is on how ethnic identity is formed, confirmed, and transformed in the course of interaction amongst individuals and media. Differences and similarities are produced and reproduced by interaction with “others” that creates images of similarity and differences. This makes ethnicity a social identity that is both individual and collective, and places its generative nature in the communication process. (pp. 142-143)

But what happens when ethnic groups interact socially with other groups? How groups maintain, or lose, their sense of ethnic identity is addressed in the next section.

### **Ethnicity and Assimilation**

America has been, and will always be, a nation of immigrants. People from many different ethnic groups and nationalities came to this country to create new lives for themselves. What they found were other ethnic people striving for the same goal. The end result was an interesting mix of ethnicities and cultures, all trying to co-exist in the same space (Daniels, 2002).

Early Americans perceived these differences, but they felt that, over time, these distinctions would fade or blend into a larger, American cultural landscape. This idea of an ethnic amalgamation, where all cultures would blend into one, harmonious group, started when Europeans first began arriving on our shores (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970). They shared a common vision of all people in the new world speaking the same language, and living together and interacting with each other peacefully (Petersen, 1997).

The seeds for our modern understandings of this process were planted during the late 1800s and early 1900s, when the method which allowed for this blending to occur became known as “assimilation.” In 1908, this term became synonymous with “melting