

CENTER FOR COGNITIVE SCIENCE

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Wednesday, August 29, 2001

280 Park Hall
North Campus
2:00 pm –3:30 pm

**“Cognitively speaking,
what is an ethnic category?”**

Francisco Gil-White, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
University of Pennsylvania

If, despite the fact that ethnic essences do not exist, ethnic actors nevertheless represent ethnies as essentialized natural groups, we must understand why. This talk will present and defend the argument that humans process ethnic groups (and a few other related social categories) as if they were species - with the associated essentialism - because their surface similarities to species make them inputs to the living kinds mental module that initially evolved to process species-level categories. The similarities in processing between species and ethnic categories will be explored (the main responsible similarities are category-based endogamy, and descent-based membership), and an evolutionary argument for this psychological borrowing from 'living kinds' reasoning to the social domain will be defended. In a nutshell, I will argue that thinking about ethnies as if they were species was adaptive in the ancestral environment because it solved problems of inference and coordination in the domain of interactional norms.

Co-sponsored by the Departments of Anthropology and Philosophy

**Refreshments will be available
Everyone is welcome to attend!**

For information please call the Cognitive Science Office at (716) 645-3794 or check
<http://wings.buffalo.edu/cogsci>