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American Ethnicity

The Dynamics and
Consequences of Discrimination

Third Edition

Adalberto Aguirre, Jr. / Jonathan H. Turner

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Preface

The ethnic composition of the population of the United States has been undergoing a profound change, especially over the last two decades. New waves of immigrants have arrived, and this demographic shift in the composition of the American population will force adjustments in previous patterns of ethnic relations. Change always produces tension; and change in the relative distributions of ethnic populations is one of the most volatile forces in human organization. At the core of ethnic tensions are (1) the sense of threat experienced by some and (2) discrimination against those who are perceived to pose this threat.

As we take our first steps into the twenty-first century, these changing ethnic demographics will continue to dominate public discourse in the United States, as a dominant Anglo population perceives its social opportunities threatened. We argue in this book that tensions between ethnic populations and a dominant Anglo population represent the core of *ethnic stratification* in American society.

Conceptual Framework

Our goal in this book is to understand how social dynamics, such as prejudice and discrimination, have affected the participation of ethnic minorities in American society. To this end, we employ a conceptual framework incorporating key ideas from theories about ethnic stratification in an effort to organize historical and census data pertaining to ethnic populations in the United States. The great virtue of using a unified conceptual framework to organize the data is that it facilitates comparison on the same social dimensions between ethnic populations in the United States and, as we explore in Chapter 10, ethnic populations in other parts of the world.

Our analysis of each ethnic group in America begins with a few simple questions:

1. What share of resources does the ethnic group receive?
2. What are the major resource outcomes for ethnic groups in the United States in terms of income, education, health care, housing, and other valued resources?

We then explore how past and present discrimination can account for inequality in the distribution of resources among various ethnic groups.

In examining the dynamics of discrimination, we call attention to important factors, such as the sense of threat experienced by those who discriminate, the varying degrees of identifiability of people as targets of discrimination, the negative stereotypes that are created to legitimize discrimination, and, most importantly, the institutionalization of discrimination in economic, political, legal, educational, and housing patterns. These forces, as they have fueled and shaped discrimination, have created a system of ethnic stratification that reinforces the very discriminatory social forces that created this system of stratification in the first place. A major challenge for American society in the new century is to attack the discriminatory social forces that produce ethnic stratification. This challenge, however, is an especially difficult one, given the rapid growth of ethnic populations in American society and the increasing and inevitable threat perceived by a dominant Anglo population as it confronts their rapid growth.

New to the Third Edition

One limitation to working with public-use data sets, such as census data, is that the data are not available when you would like them to be. In this revision, we have made every effort possible to use the most recent census data available to update the tables. We have also updated the boxes to cover emerging issues. In Chapter 4, for example, we have added a new box focusing on the *Tulsa Race War* in an effort to draw attention to the discussion of identifiability and its costs for individuals in U.S. society.

We have approached the revision of each chapter in the book with the objective of making the discussion of major social issues as comprehensive as possible. These changes and updates have not interfered with the conceptual and comparative integrity established in the previous editions of this text to guide discussion of ethnic populations in American society. Finally, we have incorporated many of the suggestions made by faculty and students, and, indeed, comments, criticisms, and suggestions from faculty and students are welcome.

Acknowledgments

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Adalberto Aguirre, Jr.
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Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations

All over the world, ethnic tension, strife, and conflict can be found. Everywhere we look, we can see that people are trying to kill each other, or at the very least, treat each other as inferior and dangerous. Ethnicity is thus a force that mobilizes people's emotions ranging from a sense of ethnic pride, on the one side, to fear and hatred of other ethnics, on the other. In very few places are tolerance and mutual understanding of ethnic differences accepted as normal, or even as desirable. True, ideologies often preach ethnic tolerance and celebration of diversity, but in actual practice, most of the world reveals ethnic tensions, open conflict, and in a few cases, efforts to exterminate others who are seen as different. Tensions are often so profound that societies are de-evolving, breaking apart along ethnic lines. The Soviet Union has collapsed around old ethnic lines; Yugoslavia has disintegrated into episodes of ethnic cleansing; Czechoslovakia is now two nations; French-speaking Canadians want to break away from the union; and India and Pakistan stand ready to use their newfound nuclear weapons as they dispute over the borders that were created to partition ethnic subpopulations. For those populations who cannot be split into new nations, the tensions persist, often erupting into violence and almost always producing systematic efforts at discriminations. And when ethnics migrate to new lands, they almost always encounter discrimination and, at times, violence. Thus, the world is filled with ethnic tension and outright conflict. Noisy and threatening protests, long-term oppression, terrorist bombings, mass killings, and war can be found everywhere on the globe. Ethnicity is one of the most volatile forces of the twenty-first century.

Why does ethnic tension and racial hatred persist in patterns of human organization? Why did the early white settlers in North America, for example, kill so many Native Americans? Why did slavery exist? Why are neo-Nazi hate groups emerging in Germany? Why are churches attended by African Americans arson targets? Why do Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland wall themselves off from each other? Why do ethnic jokes about Pollacks, Wops, Japs, Jews, and

others still persist in America at the close of the twentieth century? Why do European-origin Americans so fear Latinos? And so the questions go.

Our goal in this book is to answer these and the many related questions that can be asked about ethnicity. Our emphasis is on American ethnic tensions, but we will also seek to place these tensions in a more global perspective. Indeed, compared to the violence and killings in many parts of the world, the dynamics of ethnicity in America can appear rather muted. This is not to say, however, that tensions among American ethnics are not severe. On the contrary, the existing divisions among ethnics in the United States are at a critical phase; America will either become a viable multiethnic society, or it will degenerate into patterns of hatred and violence so evident in our nation's past and so clear in much of the world today. The task before us, then, is to understand American ethnic antagonisms; and with this understanding, perhaps we can better appreciate what needs to be done in order to reduce the conflicts among ethnic groups in America.

In this chapter, we will get started in this task by clarifying basic concepts. To understand a phenomenon like ethnicity, we need to define key terms that will be used to understand how this phenomenon operates. So let us begin with a conceptual mapping of our subject; and in the next chapter, we can turn to theorizing about the dynamic properties of American ethnic relations in global perspective.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

The term "race" connotes biological differences among peoples—skin color, facial features, stature, and the like—that are transmitted from generation to generation. As such, these biological differences are seen as permanent characteristics of people. The notion of race does not make much sense as a biological concept, however, because the physical characteristics that make people distinctive are trivial. A few alleles on genes are what account for these differences, and, most importantly, these alleles are on genes that are not determinative of basic biological functions. These biological differences are, in essence, superficial. Moreover, they do not mark clear boundaries: Where does "black" end and "white" begin? Is the child of an Asian mother and a European father more Asian or more European?

Even though biological differences are superficial and difficult to use as markers of boundaries between peoples, they are important sociologically. For if people believe that others are biologically distinctive, they tend to respond to them as being different. And when people associate superficial biological differences with variations in psychological, intellectual, and behavioral makeup, they may feel justified in treating members of a distinctive group in discriminatory ways. For example, if some individuals in a society consider dark skin an important distinction, and this distinction becomes associated in their minds with differences in the behavior of "black people," then this superficial biological difference will influence how those with black skin are treated in that society.

How, then, should we conceptualize the notion of "race" if it does not make much biological sense? Our answer is to subordinate and incorporate the idea of race into a broad definition of *ethnicity*. When a subpopulation of individuals reveals, or is perceived to reveal, shared historical experiences as well as unique organizational, behavioral, and cultural characteristics, it exhibits its ethnicity. For instance, when country of origin, religion, family practices, interpersonal style, language, beliefs, values, and other characteristics are used to demark a population of individuals from others, then ethnicity is operating. The more visible the characteristics marking ethnicity, the more likely it is that those in an ethnic category will be treated differently.

Here is where race or presumptions of biological differences become a part of ethnicity. Physical features like skin color and facial features can be used as highly visible markers of organizational, behavioral, and cultural differences among individuals. When someone is labeled "black," more than skin color is involved; whole clusters of assumptions about historical experiences, behavior, organization, and culture are associated with this label. The same is true for labels such as "white," "Asian," "Mexican," "Jew," and "Indian."

In fact, as we will come to see, labels are often self-fulfilling in creating and sustaining ethnicity. If people are given a label because of their skin color and then discriminated against as if they were different, they will react to such treatment by behaving and organizing in ways that are indeed distinctive. Once behavioral and organizational differences exist and are elaborated culturally into norms, beliefs, and other systems of symbols, they become an additional marker of differences, both justifying the earlier label and the distinctive treatment of these others as somehow "different." So, if biological distinctiveness can become a part of the label for denoting populations, then biology becomes an aspect of the social dynamics producing and sustaining ethnicity. Indeed, racial labels are like turbochargers in ethnic relations: They escalate the heat and power of emotions and tensions.

ETHNIC GROUPS

What is a group? Sociologists generally define a group as a gathering of individuals in face-to-face interaction. According to this definition, an ethnic "group" would be a number of interacting individuals distinguished by their ethnicity. Not every one of these individuals interacts face to face, but they may interact in various social settings. Obviously, when we use the term "ethnic group," we have something much bigger, broader, more inclusive in mind. *Subpopulations* of individuals in a society can be distinguished by their history as well as their distinctive behavior, organization, culture, and, perhaps, superficial biological features. An *ethnic group* is a subpopulation of individuals who are labeled and categorized by the general population and, often, by the members of a group itself as being of a particular type of ethnicity. They reveal a unique history as well as distinctive behavioral, organizational, and cultural characteristics, and, as a result, they often are treated differently by others. In addition to the term "ethnic

group,” in this text we use the terms *ethnic subpopulation* and *ethnic population*, which more accurately describe the groups that we are discussing.

MINORITY GROUPS

What is a *minority group*? Louis Wirth (1945:347) long ago offered the basic definition, the general thrust of which is still used today: “A group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.” There are many problems with this definition, however. First, it is not a group but members of a larger subpopulation who are singled out for unequal treatment. Second, the label “minority” is not always accurate; sometimes it is a majority, as was the case historically in South Africa, that is discriminated against. Thus, we should begin to revise this traditional definition of “minority group” by acknowledging what it really means: an ethnic subpopulation in a society subject to discrimination by members of *more powerful ethnic subpopulations*. Usually the victimized subpopulation is a numerical minority, and the more powerful discriminators are in the majority. Since this is not always true, however, the important issue is this: Which ethnic subpopulation has the power to discriminate? The more powerful subpopulation is the dominant or superordinate ethnic group, and the less powerful ethnic subpopulation is the subordinate group. This latter terminology, which revolves around dominance and subordination, more accurately frames the issues that were once classified as “minority group relations.”

ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

Phrases like “unequal treatment” and “distinctive treatment” have been used rather loosely thus far. These and related terms can be consolidated by one key term: “discrimination.” In general, *discrimination* is the process by which an individual, group, or subpopulation of individuals acts in ways that deny another individual, group, or subpopulation access to valued resources. So, in the context of ethnic relations, *ethnic discrimination* is the process by which the members of a more powerful and dominant ethnic subpopulation deny the members of another, less powerful and subordinate ethnic subpopulation full access to valued resources—jobs, income, education, health, prestige, power, or anything that the members of a society value.

Today, the term “reverse discrimination” is often used to emphasize that programs designed to overcome the effects of past discrimination against members of a subordinate subpopulation often deny some members of the dominant subpopulation equal access to valued resources. What makes these programs so controversial is that those denied access to resources—say, particular classes of jobs—are usually not the ones who engaged in discrimination