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Ethnographic Studies of Ethnic Chinese Children in Northern Ireland: Their Life Experiences and Perspectives

Abstract

This book is based upon ethnographic studies of two sub-groups of ethnic Chinese school children aged 12-15 living in Northern Ireland who have originated from Mainland China and Hong Kong respectively. It outlines and explores the differences in their experiences of and perspectives on living in Northern Ireland and, consequently, the different discourses they use to make sense of these. The book shows how parental occupations and the family environment play an important role in shaping and influencing children's overall attitudes, ways of thinking, perceiving, speaking and behaving. The book also attempts to show the very different discursive strategies used by these two sub-groups of ethnic Chinese children and how these, in turn, represent the internalization of their differing past experiences, individual histories and family environments. More specifically, Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus and capital, and Elias's concept of figurations are used as analytical tools throughout the empirical discourse analysis to explain such differences. Combined with post-structuralist cultural theories, the book appropriates Bhabha's concept of 'third space' to emphasize the complexity of ethnic identity and, in relation to the children that form the basis of this study, to deconstruct the dominant construction of Chinese children as an homogeneous category.

Introduction

This book is concerned with the ethnic experience of Chinese secondary school children living in Northern Ireland. Here I consider the children in two sub-groups, namely, one with parents coming from Hong Kong and the other with parents coming from Mainland China. The division of these children into two sub-groups is not to represent a fact but used as a starting point. My purpose is to investigate if and how these apparently 'Chinese' children make sense of their ethnic experience in disparate ways. Further, drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, Elias's notion of figuration and cultural studies' approach to ethnicity and identity more generally, I try to account for such cultural specificity and heterogeneity.

Previous Research on ethnic Chinese young people living in the United Kingdom has generally focused on the Chinese community with a Hong Kong background. This background is often characterised by parents working in the catering industry. However, there has been relatively little work on the community with a Mainland China background (N. B. the community is steadily growing). This background often contains a feature of professional or academic parents. Therefore, in comparing the two sociologically and culturally specific sub-groups, I shall be particularly concerned to identify and describe the complexity and diversity of the 'Chinese' children, deconstructing the generalised, homogeneous notion of the Chinese community in the United Kingdom thereby.

In this respect it may be added that children's experience, ethnicity and development cannot be divorced from their specific historical and cultural milieu. Although there has been work on ethnic Chinese minority children liv-

1

ing elsewhere in the United Kingdom, there has been virtually no research on different sub-groups of Chinese children in Northern Ireland. Therefore, my undertaking here is also specifically oriented to coming up with an understanding of the particular ethnic, and Northern Irish, situation. It is not the purpose of this project to compare and contrast the experience of Chinese immigrant children, but investigation into the Chinese children in the Northern Ireland context is logically the first step.

Research on children, ethnicity and development has tended to emphasise sociological or psychological explanations. The detailed, symbolic ways, in which children creatively construct their reality and experience, however, seem to have received only short shrift. Therefore, in this book I shall be interested to find the ways that the children themselves *make sense* of themselves and the environment, *producing* cultural specificity and heterogeneity thereby. This means that I shall pay special attention to the ways that identity and relationship are constructed and practical purposes achieved. In other words, I shall highlight the children's ethnic experience as *interactional, discursive accomplishment*.

Beyond these more or less 'descriptive' aims, I have a broader concern. The experiential divergence of these 'Chinese' children needs an explanation. In this book I draw upon Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus as a theoretical perspective on discourse and hence individuals who use it. Habitus is that which embodies past experiences and internalised socialisation; it is so ingrained in individuals that it becomes part of the unconscious so to speak (see Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990). It provides resources for thinking and acting in particular ways. Accordingly, I try to illuminate the role of the parents' discourses in the children's experience as the latter's habituses by identifying their connection and consistency with the children's discourses. For example, the Chinese parents tend to have a negative image of China on the one side and their children tend to identify with the local culture on the other side.

In accounting for the two sub-groups' discourses and hence their ethnic experience, I also make use of Elias' (1978) concept of figuration. The centrepiece of Elias' figuration lies in the interdependent but power-oriented na-

ture of individuals. For example, the Chinese children, their parents, their local peers, the wider British, Western culture are not in equal relationship with one another. This power relation can consequences for the way they make sense of their experience and reality. Accordingly, I try to highlight the role of the parents and hence the family in the children's discourses of ethnic experience by contrasting the habituses provided by the parents and other potential or real habituses in the children's talk. For example, the children with parents from Hong Kong can have a variety of habituses and yet it is the habitus of 'hardships' in Northern Ireland provided by their parents that dominates the children's discourse and hence experience.

Apart from these sociological perspectives, I also appropriate some critical themes in cultural studies regarding ethnicity, identity and cultural politics (Ang 2001; Bhabha's1990 and 1994; Tu 1994; West 1993) . Here it is argued that 'race', culture and identity are neither natural nor homogeneous categories. Nor do they have an essential, 'real' existence. Rather they are diversified, hybridised and shifting. Moreover, they are practical and interactional achievements; that is, they are the results of members' situated symbolic construction. It is further argued that social cultural research should take upon itself the task and strategy to deconstruct racial and cultural stereotypes by exploring practical cultural experience and heterogeneity in particular. In the present undertaking, therefore, I am committed to identify and highlight the particularity of the sub-groups and hence the difference of the ethnic experience of the two sub-groups of the Chinese school children. Further, I am interested in showing such culture specific identities and cultural heterogeneity as the children's active symbolic construction.

Methodologically, I have attempted an ethnographic approach, in keeping with the current general tendency of cultural studies. On the one hand, I give central prominence to the definitions, perspectives and voices of the children themselves by conducting open-ended, in-depth and informal interviews and by doing so on an extended basis. I also place my analytical focus on these interviews and analyse them qualitatively and in relatively good detail. On the other hand, I have not designed, conducted and interpreted these interviews out of context; rather I have conducted participant observa-

tion, taken field notes and interviewed their parents as well. This whole process continued for two and half years. Thus in the present analysis I draw upon this contextual knowledge when making sense of and accounting for the children's talk. This exercise includes paying close attention to the children's immediate circumstances, their parental occupations and their general social and cultural conditions.

Now let me briefly describe the contents of the book. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the extant research literature on ethnic minority Chinese children and young people living in western societies in general and in the United Kingdom in particular. It registers a number of important contributions in the field. At the same time it identifies a set of areas as lacking research or needing more attention. Here three points may be noted. First, there has seemed little research on the in-group difference and diversity amongst the 'Chinese' children, particularly in the respect of ethnic experience and identity. Related to this, secondly, there has seemed scant detailed and qualitative investigation into the ways in which the children symbolically (i. e. discursively) and actively construct their experience and identity. Thirdly, little research has been done regarding the Chinese children in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 2 moves on to revisiting a number of theoretical perspectives to do with 'race', ethnicity and development. It critiques the essentialist understanding of such categories and issues on the one hand and endorses a post-structuralist understanding in terms of specific backgrounds, interactive situations and personal experiences. In particular, it discusses Bhabha's (1990 and 1994) concept of 'interstitial space', Ang's (2001) notion of 'living-together-in-difference' and Tu's (1994) 'changing' meaning of the Chinese and argues for an understanding of ethnic experience and identity in terms of cultural and developmental specificity and in terms of practical achievement. In close connection with this pluralist and practical understanding, further, it develops Bourdieu's theory of habitus by re-interpreting it as discursive resources, which group members draw upon in their verbal communication, and argues that such 'discursive habituses' play an organising part in people's linguistic-symbolic activity. In addition, it draws upon Eli-

as' concept of figuration and argues that such discursive habituses are associated with particular social and cultural groups and therefore also saturated with power.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodologies and methods adopted in the present investigation. It starts by discussing several major methodologies and methods in the social sciences and moves onto spelling out a qualitative and ethnographically oriented approach to ethnicity, development and communication. Given the object and objectives of the present enquiry, it outlines the principles of research adhered to in the research process. This chapter also provides a detailed account of the context of the present research, the social, historical and cultural background of the informants under study and the specific techniques used in the research process.

The rest of the book presents analyses of different aspects of the empirical data. Chapter 4 focuses on the ethnic Chinese school children with a Mainland China background. It shows that the young informants organise interview talk around a variety of themes, such as the importance of education, problems of China, mitigation of prejudice, denial of ethnic difference. Further, it shows how these themes are used as rhetorical strategies to achieve and maintain forms of identification with or assimilation into the mainstream culture. In addition, it suggests how these themes form a routine and 'unconscious' complex of the children's habituses.

Parallel to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 focuses on the interview discourse of the other sub-group—ethnic Chinese children with a Hong Kong family background. It identifies and characterises a set of dominant themes, such as racial discrimination, their bleak future in Northern Ireland and their positive prospects in Hong Kong. It shows also how these discursive repertoires or habituses serve to mark a separate identity and express alienation from the mainstream local culture.

Chapters 6 and 7 provide analyses of the broader figurational contexts in which the two sub-groups of children have produced their discourses of ethnic experience as described in Chapters 4 and 5. In this sense, the two subsequent chapters serve as an explanation for the children's accounts. Here they pay special attention to the figuration represented by the two sub-

groups of Chinese parents and the nature of the respective interdependent relationships that exist between the parents and children.

Chapter 6 delineates the historical, social, political and trans-cultural context of the parents from Mainland China and the interviews with these parents. Then it compares the parents' negative discourse of China with the corresponding children's interviews examined in Chapter 4 and shows a logical relevance and coherence between these two bodies of discourses. In this way, Chapter 6 functions as an explanation for the way their children make sense of ethnic reality and experience.

Chapter 7, similarly, describes the background of the Hong Kong Chinese parents in terms of their overall family environment and disadvantaged social conditions and their discourses of hardship of living in Northern Ireland. Then it shows the links between the parents' negative representations of their life in Northern Ireland and their children's talk as discussed in Chapter 5. Here again arises a similarity and consistency between the parents and the children in the ethnic experience construction.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings and their implications for the study of the ethnic minority Chinese children. I do not claim that the present research is representative of the experiences of the two sub-groups of children studied. I have only investigated a small proportion of these sub-groups and observed and interacted with them in a limited way. Nor do I claim that this study is thorough and comprehensive of the ethnic experience of the two sub-groups. I have mainly focused on the collective patterns of experience of the two sub-groups and on the difference between the experiences of these sub-groups. Surely there will be personal differences, gender differences, socio-economic differences, regional differences, etc. amongst each of the sub-groups and there will be a certain particularity of the Northern Ireland situation in the ethnic experience of the Chinese children. However, my main concern in this research is with the qualitative heterogeneity of second school children of the two Chinese ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.

Contents

1

Chapter 1   Literature Review

1. 1   Introduction

The aim of this chapter is 1) to draw out from the existing literature in the area of ethnic Chinese children in Western societies the main arguments that have contributed to this research area; 2) to identify the gaps and limitations in relation to this literature. This, in turn, will help to contextualize and provide the rationale for my own contributions to these debates through this present book.

My research interest is to look comparatively at the two sub-ethnic groups of Chinese school children in Northern Ireland; i. e. one group originating from Mainland China, the other group is from Hong Kong family backgrounds. Unlike the ethnic demography in England with ethnic Chinese as the smallest ethnic group compared with other Asian minorities, the Chinese community in Northern Ireland is the largest ethnic minority, and has a population of over eight thousand people (see Holder, 2003; also see the Chinese Welfare Association; Annual Report 1998). A significant number of these are the younger generation of ethnic Chinese. Little, however, is known of this young generation of the Chinese community in Northern Ireland. For instance, how do the ethnic Chinese children in Northern Ireland perceive themselves? How are they coping with learning their mother language? How do they interpret their experiences and everyday realities in Northern Ireland? What are their attitudes towards learning their own ethnic language? And how do they envisage their future life? These issues need to

be seriously researched.

In this chapter, I will identify three research areas that are relevant to my current research and briefly discuss about their contributions and missing gaps respectively. These three research areas are: 1) Race and identity in ethnic Chinese children's lives, 2) Language and communication, 3) Education and employment: experiences of young ethnic Chinese people.

1. 2 Race and Identity in Ethnic Chinese Children's Lives

Among the broad literature on race and identity, especially in the specific area of ethnic minority Chinese and identity in the UK, David Parker (1995) is the most relevant researcher for my current book (in the sense that it is concerned about ethnic Chinese young people in the UK, their sense of identity and with ethnographic approach), and one of the first researchers to have provided a rich and *empirically grounded* analysis of the experiences and changing identities of young Chinese people in Britain. Parker's research emphasises understanding the *processes* of the ethnic Chinese young people's identity formation in Britain. In his study, he explores the theoretical notion of identity as open, multifaceted and always under construction by an analysis of the ways in which young Chinese people are constructing their senses of who they are.

Parker is one of the pioneer researchers who introduce the issues of Chinese identity formation into the existing theories of cultural studies in Britain. His research group includes ethnic Chinese young people from age 17 to 34 in Birmingham, London, Newcastle, Manchester, Warwick and Liverpool. His research methods cover both 54 extended interviews and 500 survey questionnaires. Since the globalisation of culture is making cultural analysis increasingly complex, Parker uses his rich empirical data to show that the cultural identities of the ethnic Chinese young people are open and plural, instead of fixed and essentialist. Parker moves towards a more integrated account of identity formation by opening up new areas of research: showing the need for a creative dialogue between forms of textual analysis, qualitative methodology, and survey-based investigation. His work is a con-

tribution to the debates in cultural studies about identity, and accordingly is driven by a tension between two views on cultural identity, namely, the essentialist and the pluralist.

Parker brings out the voices of the ethnic Chinese young people in Britain. The traditional focus on how the mainstream society talks about 'the outsider' now transfers to the 'the outsider' themselves. Nothing is more powerfully true to talk about themselves than to be talked about by others. Thus, in Parker's work, I see such difference. Parker shows a wide variety of the ethnic Chinese young people's constructions of identity and their responses to racial discrimination, which he summarises as: firstly, a strong sense of Chinese identity; secondly, a desire to be 'normal' and be accepted as British; thirdly, mixed and ambivalent feelings, attachment to locality rather than to nation; and fourthly, connecting being Chinese to other forms of identification (Parker, 1995: 137). All these responses exemplify the subjectivity of conditional belonging. In other words, Parker considers different identifications in part as a defence against constructions that ascribe undesired positions to individuals. 'Some (interviewees) construct their sense of identity through defence against the anxiety and guilt felt at having lost Chinese identity. Others project their strength onto those they feel as having lost their "true" identities.' (1995: 173) This shows exactly how identity can be unstable, flexible and constantly changing according to situations.

Parker's idea on cultural identity starts from that of Bhabha (1990) who stresses non-finality and psychic processes of identification (1988). Parker thinks that such non-finality and psychic processes of identification are a useful corrective to rigid and closed definitions of identity. He regards such a notion of identification as more concrete to view the post-colonial situation as one opening up new spaces of hybridity and unforeseen combinations of cultural identity (Parker, 1995). However, Parker warns Bhabha of the danger of producing a new rigidity that merely values difference for its own sake while using the term of 'hybrid'. 'We can not presume that all young Chinese in Britain, for example, view themselves as "hybrid", or that this is the best description to use' (Parker, 1995: 26). People's perceptions of

themselves may be different from each other.

Parker gets further inspirations from the works of Stuart Hall who has shown an increasing interest in culture and identity in new and multiple forms (Hall, 1992). Stuart Hall has been one of the major contributors in developing a differentialist account of identity formation from within a British context, exploring the implosion of older stable social categories, such as class and black identity. Stuart Hall suggests a number of elements of identity, which he sees being opened up particularly in psychoanalysis and feminism. According to Hall, identities are always incomplete, actively in the process of being formed, a process of identification, and partially a narrative, involving selective representations that contribute to one's sense of oneself (Mac an Ghaill, 1999).

From this perspective, Chinese identity would be seen, as starting from a fixed set of attributes, as something inherently possessed by virtue of being Chinese. The second form of identity de-centres the subject and has a hybrid view of culture and sees identities as continently connected through open forms of narrative. In relation to Chinese identity, the stress would be on mobile and multifaceted identifications, with Chinese identity only a part of a broader set of connections.

Parker's major contribution is to combine Stuart Hall's conception of subjectivity and open forms of narrative (Hall, 1992) with ethnographic accounts and political economic analysis to approach his own research in order to produce a new vocabulary for describing cultural identities (Parker, 1995). Hall's conception of subjectivity is an open and plural one, and it moves away from the essentialist conception of subjectivity towards the development of the de-centred subjectivity (Bailey & Hall, 1992; Parker, 1994). Since both Hall and Gilroy have not supported this theory with extended ethnographic accounts or political economic analysis, Parker fills in this gap. The new vocabulary is therefore what Parker calls 'subjectivity of conditional belonging' (Parker, 1994: 30). Hall best expresses such subjectivity of conditional belonging when he states the following:

Third generation young black men and women know that they come from the