Ethnicities

The Benefits of Comparison: New Challenges to Ethnicity and Immigration Research

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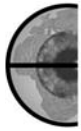Additional services and information for *Ethnicities* can be found at:

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What is This?

Review Symposium: *Ethnicity, Social Mobility and Public Policy. Comparing the USA and the UK*, by Glen C. Loury, Tariq Modood and Steven M. Teles (eds) (published 2005, pbk/hbk)

The benefits of comparison

New challenges to ethnicity and immigration research

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There may be no field of social science in America as parochial as the study of race and ethnicity. If one looks over the social sciences, one will find practitioners in other subject areas extolling the value of comparative analysis, but the analytical leverage from cross-national research methodologies has not yet hit the study of American race relations. Perhaps this should not be too surprising – what other country offers a similarly dynamic, complex, tragic and hopeful set of relations? And scholars have, of course, compared different groups *within* the USA, and this has been the standard strategy for years. But one look at the edited volume brought to us by Glenn Loury, Tariq Modood and Steven Teles shows how much we have needed such a work. This comparative analysis of ethnicity and mobility, conspicuous in its novelty, is wide-ranging and impressive in its uniting of different disciplines. Most importantly, it forces us to see the USA not as a universe in itself, but an instance of a set of phenomena found in many contexts.

Reading the book, I had three recurring thoughts that will form the basis of this review. First, the chapters in the book suggest that focusing discussions on 'racial minorities', or 'people of color', though common in the USA, is of surprisingly limited sociological utility for understanding mobility (but may be crucial for understanding power inqualities). Second,

the move to offer comparative analysis of ethnic mobility highlights a limitation of existing research that I will argue has significance: the lack of analysis of immigrant countries of origin. Understanding immigrant sending states, I argue, may shed light on mobility patterns. Third, the persistence of distinctive patterns of mobility for white ethnics, highlighted by several chapters here, cries out for explanation, and suggests a complexity to ethnic disadvantage that is not yet understood.

THE UTILITY OF 'PEOPLE OF COLOR' AS A SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPT

Since the middle 1960s, the term 'racial minorities' (or simply 'minorities') has been used in American civil rights discourse to refer to African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans (Skrentny, 2002). In American mass and news media, academia and politics, the phrase 'people of color' has also gained widespread currency to refer to the same populations outside of the civil rights context. Though less prominent in the UK, as Modood reminds us, it exemplifies what Peter Skerry calls here the American 'post-civil rights regime,' where differences and conflicts among minority groups are hidden or ignored. In all usages, these phrases imply that there is a white/non-white divide, and that non-white groups share a great deal in common. Reading the various chapters in this volume, however, may cause a reader to question what it is, exactly, that these various groups – blacks, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans in the USA and blacks and Asians in the UK – do have in common.

Perhaps the most significant point raised in several chapters is the condition of Black Exceptionalism: no group, in the USA or the UK, looks similar to the descendants of African slaves in the USA. This is stated explicitly in the editors' introduction and in Nathan Glazer's chapter, where he points out divergent social patterns and inequality exhibited by African Americans, such as very high rates of residential segregation. But the notion that American blacks are unique in the US–British comparison is implicit in several other chapters. Glenn Loury's normative analysis on race discrimination only discusses this group, for example, and Orlando Patterson's four-part typology and analysis of black incorporation in different world regions sets off the African diaspora from others anywhere in the world, and, of course, each destination from each other.

Many of the other chapters, though also not discussing 'Black Exceptionalism,' emphasize the diversity of experiences among racial groups and the overlap of these experiences with some white ethnic groups. Mary J. Hickman shows that the Irish have done better than blacks in the UK, but less well than Asians. Ceri Peach's work is perhaps the strongest challenge

to the coherence of 'people of color' category, as he shows that different racial minorities in the UK are following assimilation tracks similar to white immigrants before them: Caribbean blacks are resembling the Irish, and Asians are resembling Jews. Peach thus shows that not only are racial groups different from each other, but they also resemble white immigrant groups in their mobility patterns. Min Zhou shows the distinctiveness of Chinese institutions in the USA, setting off the Chinese not only from other people of color but also from other Asians. Richard Berthoud argues that in the UK 'it is the diversity between minority groups that is their most striking characteristic' (p. 224). Michael Hout points out that class dynamics are important for understanding mobility and that Latinos, though not unambiguously a racial group (and officially an ethnicity according to the US Census), are gaining faster than African Americans. Modood identifies different group achievement rates, and shows that Asians do better than whites in education and professions. Roger Waldinger shows how niche employment leads to varying group outcomes that do not depend on a white/non-white distinction. Anthony Heath and Dorren McMahon maintain that among the second generation in the UK, Irish and Asians do better than blacks. And Steve Teles, Robert Mickey and Fawzia Ahmed catalogue all manner of differences between non-white groups.

Put simply, then, the white/non-white division does not map onto patterns of mobility, at least one racial group (African Americans) is utterly unique, and at least in the British case non-white patterns can be understood as falling into paths blazed by white immigrants who came earlier (Bean and Stevens (2003) suggest that Latinos in the USA appear to be following white immigrant's paths). One might argue that the people-of-color concept describes a political coalition, but this is more of a wish than a reality. Ethnic and racial groups, including non-whites, have greatly varying political orientations and party affiliations, at least in the USA (Garza, 1992; Hajnal and Baladassare 2001; Lien et al., 2004; Hajnal and Trounstine, 2005).

On the other hand, a few of the authors do point out distinctive patterns that suggest a white/non-white divide. Heath and McMahon argue that race matters in the first generation immigrants to the UK, as only Irish do well (though this difference disappears in the next generation). Berthoud argues that all non-whites face common experiences of harassment. And Vaughan Robinson and Rina Valeny argue that Asian self-employment in the UK is a response to racism (as well as economic restructuring) and Asian ambition is a response to racism and glass ceilings in the workplace. In a general way, these authors follow Tocqueville, who argued long ago that color difference would haunt African Americans even after emancipation.

However, what all of these chapters show is that though being non-white may lead to everyday slights and harassment, non-white status does not explain long-term mobility patterns. In this respect, these chapters dovetail

with other recent work that argues that the crucial divide in American racial inequality is not white/non-white but black/non-black (Gans 1999; Bean and Stevens 2003).

If the 'people of color' and 'racial minorities' concepts and the white/non-white divide are not helpful explaining mobility patterns, are they useful? I would argue that they do have utility for understanding what is perhaps the most important dimension of racial ordering: political power. As Modood and Robert Lieberman point out, whites continue to dominate national political institutions in both countries. The failure of upward economic mobility to come with commensurate political power is a puzzle, and calls for more analysis along the lines provided by Skerry, who offers an imaginative and critical look at the contemporary American civil rights regime.

WHAT ABOUT IMMIGRANT HOMELANDS?

The second issue raised by these chapters is the tight focus on contexts of immigrant reception and relative lack of interest shown for conditions in immigrant sending states. As Waldinger puts it here, at 'the top of the immigration research agenda' is how immigrants change after they have arrived. I agree, and believe this topic is of great importance. But should we care that the study of immigrant *homelands* does not show up anywhere on this agenda? I think that we should.

First, it is simply difficult to believe that decades of socialization and acculturation in sending states are not retained in the minds of immigrants when they land on new shores. Yet with a few exceptions (such as Waters, 1999; and Kim, 2004) immigration scholars, including those in this collection, rarely move beyond the host society. To be sure, I would agree, for example, with Zhou when she maintains that networks and Chinatown institutions are key factors in Chinese success in the USA, and Robinson and Valeny are probably right that Asians in the UK compensate for likely discrimination by focusing on jobs in the professions. Waldinger correctly emphasizes the importance of ethnic niches, which often have no analog in group experience in the sending state and are creations in the host state.

But consider the puzzle of Asian educational success. I would argue that a likely factor contributing to Asian educational success, at least among east Asians, is conditions in the homeland. This is not necessarily an argument for the importance of an Asian value on culture, but for educational practices in at least some east Asian countries that may lead to cultural practices. In other words, similar to the way that Wilson (1987) argued that structural conditions led to practices that were mistakenly attributed solely to a 'culture of poverty,' it seems likely that educational practices in Asia lead to a 'culture of education' among Asian immigrants.

My evidence is admittedly impressionistic, but I think compelling enough that systematic analysis could yield valuable insights. The possibility became apparent to me during research in South Korea (on another topic), where there is a massive industry devoted to preparing students for a life-determining college entrance exam. Parents in Korea are obsessed with the education of their children. Tutoring and prep courses are a huge industry, and the obsession with school performance is a theme found everywhere, including soap operas, movies and even a brand of milk with Einstein's picture on it.

It is not only Korea that exhibits a strong family orientation to education. *Business Week* reported in February 2005 that Korea and Japan far outpace the USA in spending on college exam prep (Helm, 2005). Similar educational practices are evident elsewhere. It was a Vietnamese American student who pointed out to me in class that an anecdote used in an assigned reading, Portes and Rumbaut's *Legacies* (2001), could have been a major part of the book's argument. This student highlighted how a Portes and Rumbaut interviewee explained that an exam determines who goes to university and who goes to the military, and argued that all Vietnamese devote great resources to education to avoid the military. One sees similar patterns in other Asian states. The second highest grossing film in Singapore history, *I Not Stupid*, offers critical commentary about life in Singapore based on the struggles of three boys tracked into a school for slow learners, where they face regular humiliations and parents who beat them as punishment for low grades. It is a strong possibility that in states where individual fates strongly depend on an examination, an educational culture will develop that will translate to upward mobility in receiving states, supplying a 'cultural capital' that goes along with the human capital that immigrants also bring to the receiving state. Thus, though the principle is established that immigrants bring important traits to receiving states, the application can be expanded to include these cultural orientations or repertoires. More research is needed, and the impact of life in sending states can be tested through comparative analysis such as that in this volume.

EXPLAINING WHITE ETHNIC DISTINCTIVENESS

A final observation: as an American who knew a thing or two about race relations in the UK from the prior work of Teles and Lieberman, as well as Bleich (2003), I was still quite surprised to learn of the situation of the Irish in chapters by Hickman, Peach and Heath and McMahon, who all show that the Irish have maintained distinctive mobility patterns in British society. We do not expect to see white ethnic patterns in mobility in the USA. There is a great body of research showing that now is the era of the 'twilight of

ethnicity' (Alba, 1990) among white ethnics, who enjoy 'ethnic options' (Waters, 1990), essentially a harmless choice regarding whether they want to identify as ethnics or not. The Irish case in the UK reminds us that cultural assimilation does not mean the end of distinctiveness. Of course, the work of Waldinger on ethnic niches suggests that American ethnic distinctiveness, as shown with the Irish British, should be expected. There are indicators that show the persistence of white ethnicity across generations in patterns of mobility. Could this all be explained by ethnic niches? The recent work of Alba and Abdel-Hady (2005) suggests not, as Italian Americans in the professoriate appear to encounter barriers at the elite level. It is clear that researchers need to do a better job of understanding causes of ethnic disadvantage and identifying when, to whom, and how discrimination affects mobility patterns. In this volume and in other research, for example, discrimination is invoked to explain both low achievement and high achievement of different racial groups. Rarely do authors entertain the possibility that discrimination might still affect white ethnic groups. Other than ethnic niches, there are few explanations for the persistence of white ethnic distinctiveness in mobility, achievement and occupational distributions. Cross-national comparisons would likely shed light on this continuing puzzle.

These comments are not meant in a critical spirit. I hope they show that this excellent volume provoked my own thinking on these issues in worthwhile directions. The editors here and all contributing authors deserve applause for their efforts that, to this reader's mind, so clearly display the dynamics of ethnic mobility and force us – finally – to think cross-nationally.

Acknowledgements

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Best of old school

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There is hardly a political issue that nowadays provides so much fuel for political controversy as the integration of ethnic minorities of immigrant origin. Of course, this increased contentiousness of immigration and integration issues is partly related to the events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist actions in Europe, most notably in Madrid, Amsterdam and London. The perpetrators of these acts had all lived for lengthy periods of time in the West, and in the case of the Amsterdam and London events they were even born in the Netherlands and the UK. Other ethnic conflicts in Europe in