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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue on Race and Ethnicity

The tension between ascribed and achieved status pervades much of sociology, sometimes as a latent theme and sometimes manifest. The articles in this issue of *Sociological Forum* revisit this tension through the lens of race and ethnicity. They examine contexts varying widely from adolescents in the United States to upper-caste Muslims in India. The specific issues they address are also diverse: the relationship between race, democracy, and equal opportunity; deviant behavior among teenagers of different ethnic groups; intermarriage among whites and minorities in contemporary U.S. society; the strategic commonalities between the Deaf, gay, and white supremacist movements; and finally, the tension between modernization, economic development, and caste/racial identity. Yet, the articles also share a broader common theme: each concerns the paradoxes that emerge when ascribed racial or ethnic identity collides with powerful forces that represent the conditions of achieved position.

In this vein, Mitch Berbrier examines a tension that results from the civil rights movement. He argues that the minority status of African Americans has become the sine-qua-non of minority status to which other groups aspire. He demonstrates how the Deaf movement appropriated the rhetoric of a minority ethnic group to distance itself from the label of “disability status”—arguing instead that the Deaf form a cultural and linguistic minority group, not a collection of individuals who share a “medical” condition. He also shows how many gay activists abandoned an assimilationist perspective—which argued that except for sexual preference, the homosexual community is just like the heterosexual community—in favor of a minority status argument. Even white supremacists, as embodied by David Duke’s National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP), have coopted the political strategy of blacks, arguing that whites are a minority group (in cultural and power terms if not in numbers). In all of these cases, activists are attempting to create ascriptive statuses. However, this requires an

intergenerational community, something that is not as easily accomplished for the Deaf and gays as it is for, say, white supremacists. The reason, of course, is the substantial variation in membership within kinship groups for the former two groups. Deaf leaders, in fact, actively worry about those who are Deaf children of hearing parents.

While Americans may actually be trying to *create* groups defined as “ethnic,” Syed Ali observes that, among Muslims in Hyderabad, India, the pull of race–caste membership is waning. While some individuals exhibit strong ethnic attachments, as indicated by their strong, intragroup social networks, for others, group membership is an elective option, much as it is for many whites in the United States (Waters 1992). Here the tensions between a modern economy and a traditional caste system are strong. Many Muslims of high caste can no longer rely on their ascribed position for social status, but must achieve recognition and power through socioeconomic advancement—as measured by education, occupation, and income. Westernization, not appeal to the past, is the linchpin to high status. Symbolic caste still matters, but only in combination with these achieved socioeconomic statuses. It can be the icing on the cake, so to speak, or a negative stigma to be overcome; either way, it is always viewed through the lens of achieved status—an interaction effect of sorts. To add a final complication to the Hyderabad story, Muslim religious identity (semiascribed, semiachieved) has waxed in importance as the importance of primordial caste has waned.

The next two articles examine some of these same themes through quantitative analysis. Jerry Jacobs and Teresa Labov investigate the rates of white/minority intermarriage for a wide range of ethnic groups. In particular, these authors ask why Robert Merton’s half-century-old exchange theory of intermarriage does not seem to hold for Asian American ethnic groups. Exchange theory predicts larger out-marriage rates for minority males who are able to trade achieved status for ethnic prestige. However, among Asian American groups, women are much more likely to out-marry than men. Jacobs and Labov find that the “war bride” phenomenon only partially accounts for this “anomaly.” In fact, no single theory—whether Merton’s exchange theory or Wilson’s class-based theory—can explain the patterns of intermarriage across all ethnic groups. With respect to marriage patterns, at least, particularism seems to carry the day.

While no general theory seems to account for varied marriage patterns, the general principles for explaining deviance rates among ethnic groups exhibit some consistency. Here, too, the Asian American pattern is taken as the atypical case in need of explanation. In looking at misbehavior at school, Sung Joon Jang finds that Asian Americans generally get into trouble less often, but the factors explaining these differences have to do with generalizable impacts of family background (i.e., SES, etc.), school bonding, and

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commitment to education (although family bonding did not seem to explain racial differences). Further, while there is substantial ethnic heterogeneity within the Asian American population, the strength of background variables seems invariant across these groups. In other words, if we want to reduce ethnic differences in deviance, we can develop general programs to increase school involvement and reduce social risks like family poverty.

To conclude our exploration of these themes, Collin Wayne Leach explores another tension between egalitarianism and racial inequality by reexamining Gunnar Myrdal's classic, *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal, according to Leach, held an idealistic, liberal reformist view that true "democratic egalitarianism is anathema to racism and racial inequality." However, Myrdal's most provocative argument, argues Leach, is that twentieth-century racism in the United States is a paradoxical outcome of egalitarianism that stems back to the founding of the Republic. Specifically, in trying to resolve the dissonance between democratic, egalitarian ideals and the reality of slavery and racial oppression, the only viable ideology is one that asserts the inherent racial-biological inferiority of African Americans. More recently, the appeal to democratic egalitarianism stigmatizes calls for more progressive programs of racial redistribution as "reverse discrimination." In short, as *de jure* attempts to end racial inequality increase, we may also witness increases in racism. Attributing these insights to Myrdal overturns the widely held assumption that this view of racism emerged as a more recent reaction to the civil rights era in the form of critical race theory.

Sociology has come a long way from primordial conceptions of ethnicity to cultural and symbolic ones, but our understanding of the various ways in which race and ethnicity trump and are trumped by other factors still has a long way to go. This collection of articles aims to take us further down the road toward that goal.

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