

The future of ethnicity in america

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The Future of Ethnicity in America This paper will examine the future of ethnicity in America by answering three appealing questions. First, how does symbolic ethnicity enter into contemporary American racial and ethnic relations? Second, why might immigrant youths choose to assimilate to the culture of low-income, inner-city youths instead of white middle-class culture? Lastly, why do some cases of interethnic contact generate conflict and others do not? Symbolic ethnicity is a term coined by Herbert Gans. It refers to ethnicity that is individualistic in nature and without real social cost for the individual. These symbolic identifications are essentially leisure time activities, rooted in nuclear family traditions reinforced by voluntary enjoyable aspects for being ethnic (Gans 424-429). Symbolic ethnicity arises "as the functions of ethnic cultures and groups diminish and identity becomes the primary way of being ethnic" (Gans 1985: 434). Gans predicted that this form of ethnicity may easily persist into the fifth and sixth generations and beyond (Dale, and Romo 441). People are less and less interested in their ethnic cultures and organizations and are instead more concerned with maintaining their ethnic identity, with the feeling of being Jewish or Italian or Polish, and with finding ways of feeling and expressing that identity in suitable ways. Identity here simply means the sociopsychological elements that accompany role behavior, and the ethnic role is today less of an ascriptive than a voluntary role that people assume alongside other roles. To be sure, ethnics are still identified as such by others, particularly on the basis of name, but the behavioral expectations that once went with identification by others have declined sharply, so that ethnics have some choice about when and how to play ethnic roles.

Moreover, as ethnic cultures and organizations decline further, fewer ethnic roles are prescribed, thus increasing the degree to which people have freedom of role definition (Herbert J. Gans 175). Symbolic ethnicity can create tension between the ethnic group being imitated and the ethnic group doing the imitation. For Whites, symbolic ethnicity is very appealing because they can identify with another group without suffering the consequences people of that group would suffer. When the chance for penalty arise, the White person can drop their act of symbolic ethnicity, but the non-White suffers the consequences regularly because " the consequences of being Asian or Hispanic or black are not symbolic...They are real and hurtful" (Waters 1990: 156). Whether the continuation of White ethnic distinctiveness and identity will be the central focus of everyday life or an expression of " a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation" (Gans 1985: 435) remains to be seen. Either way, however, the expectation is for a continued prominence of White ethnicity in American life for at least one or two more generations and a continued or growing acceptance of cultural pluralism as the principal view of the way immigrants and their descendants should become Americanized (Dale, and Romo 445). The second question regarding the future of ethnicity in America is why might immigrant youths choose to assimilate to the culture of low-income, inner-city youths instead of white middle-class culture? Immigrant youths might choose to assimilate to the culture of low-income, inner-city youths instead of White middle-class culture for several reasons. First, the majority of their ancestors were " poverty stricken peasants accustomed to life in small villages and farms" (Dale, and Romo 90) but managed to migrate to the United States to obtain

a better way of life and have not assimilated to the host society which includes White middle class Americans. An important goal of the immigrant ethnic group after immigration is to organize for mutual assistance and protection to assist its members to combat discrimination and gain equality with the majority in important areas such as jobs, education, and political participation. The relationship of the immigrant minority to the host society is likely to be one of resistance to some aspects of assimilation combined with active efforts to achieve secondary assimilation (Dale, and Romo 448). The immigrant youth may tend to assimilate to the low-income, inner-city youth because the inner-city youth are generally part of the minority group as well. Inner-city youth can relate to the non-White consequences of being a minority that are real and hurtful. As the members of immigrant groups become more numerous or more highly concentrated in a particular area, competition arises between the natives and the newcomers for "the same valued resources (e. g., housing, schools, jobs, other kinds of rewards)" and this situation is likely to lead members of both groups to organize to further their own interests (Olzak 1986: 18). Such situations may cause people whose ethnic identities and attachments originally were weak to place a higher value and emphasis on them than in the past. A strong line of division may develop between "them" and "us" where no line or only a weak line previously existed (Dale, and Romo 449). Waters states, "In the United States, through exercise of individual choice, people not only demonstrate their uniqueness, they also recognize and actualize their integration with others. They do this by making, acknowledging, and perpetuating social ties based solely on the affinity that arises through making the same choices

(Beeman 1986, 59)" (150). Not only do they relate more to the inner city youth, but they use symbolic ethnicity to hold on to the identities of their immigrant relatives and cultures. The youths are following in the footsteps of their parents, continuing to build centripetal relationships with the host society, in which the White middle-class culture is a part. Class is particularly important. For example, Sara Lee has found that while upper middle class second generation Korean Americans are proud of their identity and express it in a number of ways, their working class peers display less interest in their national identity and are more concerned with economic security and class position (Waters, Ueda, and Marrow 150). The final question involving the future of ethnicity is why do some cases of interethnic contact generate conflict and others do not? Any ethnic contact that involves one group overpowering another creates conflict. Multiethnic countries are typical in the modern world, and many of the people who comprise those countries favor increasing the political independence of their own ethnic group. Serious tensions exist even within some countries that are celebrated as examples of ethnic harmony. Sweden is a prime example of a country that had no history of colonialism or interracial conflict. Sweden made a commitment to create an equitable society and welcome newcomers to their country. Those who went to work temporarily were even incorporated into their society instead of being shipped back to their native lands. The Swedish government went as far as to offer immigrants language lessons for free to help the immigrants to conform to their new homes. Other countries such as Brazil and others in Latin America have few racial conflicts, but social class lines instead of racial or ethnic background, represent the dominant divisions

in their societies. On the other hand, South Africa is in the midst of recovering from apartheid. Blacks were the minority and whites controlled the majority of wealth of the nation, the good jobs, and the government. At that time, blacks were below the poverty line, half were illiterate and they were denied adequate education and jobs. Nelson Mandela became the president, dismantled apartheid and brought the black majority to power. There is major conflict amongst the country's ethnic groups because the whites are not accepting programs to equalize inequality. Not only is South African blacks and whites in conflict amongst themselves, but there are also tensions regarding the large amount of immigrants fleeing to the country. Antiforeign attitudes, particularly against undocumented Black immigrants, are widespread, and violence against all immigrants is growing. (Dale, and Romo 458) It appears, in conclusion, that symbolic ethnicity will be around for the next few generations as people continue to assimilate and move toward a more individualistic than cultural view. People in contemporary America are more interested in the feelings of belonging to an ethnic group but not having the responsibilities of the traditional behaviors. This will make the path of assimilation smoother for immigrant youth, because they will continue the relationships their families started, but also build better relationships with the host society paving their own ways to Americanization. Throughout this process, there will still be conflicts amongst the ethnic groups, as some will exude their racial and ethnic differences as opposed to working toward national unity. References Dale, S., and Harriett Romo. Racial and Ethnic Relations in America. Allyn & Bacon, 2004. 458. Print. Gans, Herbert J. Making Sense of America: Sociological Analyses and Essays.

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