

Theoretical perspectives to explain the ethnic conflict essay



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In the United States, explanatory theories of racial and ethnic relations have been concerned with migration, adaptation, exploitation, stratification, and conflict. Most such theories can be roughly classified as either order theories or power-conflict theories, depending on their principal concerns. Order theories tend to accent patterns of inclusion, of the orderly integration and assimilation of particular racial and ethnic groups to a core culture and society, as in the third and fourth of the outcomes just described.

The central focus is on progressive adaptation to the dominant culture and on stability in inter-group relations. Power-conflict theories give more attention to the first and fifth outcomes-to genocide and continuing hierarchy-and to the persisting inequality of the power and resource distribution associated with racial or ethnic subordination. In the United States most assimilation theories are examples of order theories. Internal colonialism theories and class-oriented neo-Marxist viewpoints are examples of power-conflict theories.

There is considerable variation within these broad categories, but they do provide a starting point for our analysis. Mary C. Waters, describes in her book *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, the difficulties Caribbean Immigrants encounter while trying to establish themselves in the United States. These difficulties range from encountering race related problems, self identification, and the struggle of parents to maintain their cultural values and pass them on to their children.

Furthermore, these immigrants have to adapt to the United States Laws, and therefore have to give up some of their cultural practices. Immigrants and

Ethnicity Waters gives us an example how Caribbean immigrants having difficulties understanding that their way of disciplining children such as beatings is forbidden by the Law and considered child abuse. Taking the findings of Waters, and examine the culture and social structure of the new African immigrants we can somewhat predict the challenges they will encounter and how this will effect immigration in the next 30 years.

Just like the Caribbean's the Ghanaians and Nigerians are visible identifiable. They are black, and immigrate to a country where the image of African American blacks is stereotyped by most whites as urban underclass or ghetto blacks (Waters 343). A distinct difference is found in the location these immigrants settle. Whereas the Caribbean's settle mostly along the east coast, the Africans go everywhere in the U. S. and they too are highly segregated from white neighborhoods to establish themselves as an ethnic group to avoid that negative image that American society attaches to African Americans.

The new immigrants are young adults, and are just starting families, are trying to get their first professional job. Dr. John. R. Logan, Professor of sociology at Brown University, announced in his broadcast that the new African immigrants are highly educated and have higher level incomes : " These places the African immigrants in the United States with the highest educated Asian immigrants and actually higher than non-Hispanic whites. " Nevertheless, despite the higher income and better education, African professionals and students are not spared from racism and discrimination they are still viewed as black minorities.

The immigrants just starting families will face the same problems the Caribbean's parents have currently with their children. Nigerians' as well as Ghanaian children will be exposed to the American way of life and will experience the difficulties of self identification. They are supposed to live according to their parents teaching and the parent's cultural values. Most likely they will take on multi cultural identities to be accepted within their respective environment.

Social Stratification, Ethnic Theories and Immigrants Many African communities have established institutions such as churches or associations where they can practice their cultures within their ethnic groups. In Philadelphia, there are more than forty such associations that are established to create a familiar atmosphere for socializing and mutual aid. Some of them have schools to teach second generation children the communities' language and provide aid to newcomers. The rise and fast growing numbers of this institution suggests that in the next 30 years these communities will expand and continue to grow.

For African immigrants in the future, these communities will continue to provide the networks and ethnic environment that helps Africans to find a new home in this country or a temporary base for those who are planning to return to Africa. Africans are great entrepreneurs. Within their own community they have build businesses such as hair braiding shops, food stores, and nightclubs and restaurants. Many are using their traditional skills, such as hair braiding, tailoring or dressmaking, and cooking as a basis for their businesses.

At the same time, they rely on traditional social networks within their immigrant communities - friendship, kinship, and people from the same region or ethnic group back home - to help them succeed. This ethnic niche also provides job opportunities for fellow Africans. The job opportunities provided by these entrepreneurs do not provide a solution for all Africans. Africans come from 53 nations, and many have intertribal conflicts as well as different languages. Therefore only Africans who are able to speak the common language and bring the same cultural background are able to join this market.

African businesses will continue to grow in the next decades, many African Americans are customers and they enjoy being able to obtain ethnic foods, and other commodities. As Brown's Professor Logan points out while many Africans are more integrated in mainstream American society than other African Americans, the greater part of African immigrants live in the same communities as majority African Americans and new arrivals tend to settle first where they find common ethnic groups. Therefore, these new immigrants will face the same problems concerning schools, security, and the local environments that African Americans are facing currently.

They will be funneled into inner-city neighborhoods where families are exposed to declining city services, crime and violence, and deteriorating housing stock" (Waters 284). Because Africans are black, we can apply what Waters describes in her study about the West Indians. As she explains, racial segregation for blacks is different than the segregation of non black immigrants. Segregation is just as severe for middle class as for poor class.

Immigration has also imposed a change on family structure. In African
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culture, the extended family is the main unit that makes up their social environment.

Respect for the elderly is highly valued. The elderly, meaning the parents of immigrants are mostly left behind. Instead of the extended family, the nuclear family becomes more common in the lives of African Immigrants. Changes in gender roles have also a great impact on immigrant families. Unlike in their home country, many African women join the workforce and more girls are able to attain higher education. All these changes in the family structures create difficulties to maintain the original cultural values but it has also created opportunities for African women.

Many Africans choose to become somewhat Americanized depending on their economical situation. If necessary, women join the workforce, to help improving living standards. These new perspective and opportunities is most welcome by African women. Since the main goals for many Africans are the attainment of better economical lives, and to support their extended family, woman employment will definitely increase in the next decades within African families. Not all African immigrants come to the United States to stay permanently. Many come to earn money to support their families in their home countries.

They voluntarily take on American citizenships to attain voting rights and legal status. But their main focus is set on making enough money to buy a nice home in their country. According to Diouf, this has become common practice among women as well. Women come for a while to this country to make some money to take back and pay for a child's tuition. Some even buy

a house at home renting it out, and reclaim it when they return. The influx of higher educated African immigrants is contributed partially to the “ diversity Lottery” where immigrants can win a visa.

The requirements are at least a high school education for eligibility. These groups of immigrant have very close ties to their home country and generate remittances of about 3 billion dollars annually that are sent to their home country on a yearly basis. Even so, many Africans express that they like to stay in the United States, a great number of them would rather return to Africa. According to Diouf, their major reasons are the attachments to their extended families, missing their home culture and their estrangement from American Culture.

They stress that they do appreciate the economical advantages and educational opportunities, but do not like the promoted individualism, the violence and the racial oppositional views they encounter in this country. They stay for themselves (within their community), and avoid socializing with the dominant culture. This behavior clearly shows the conflicts Africans have adapting to American ways. They definitely do not want to be viewed as African Americans, practice their own culture and keep their distinct ethnicity. Ethnic Conflicts and Theoretical Perspectives

Such behavior has most likely caused the conflict between them and the African Americans. African Americans have the notion that Africans are arrogant, come to this country to take away the best jobs. The differences in education, culture and economic success creates a great divide, and therefore a minority within a minority group. As long as these two groups do

not find a way to understand each other and accept their differences, assimilation for Africans that want to stay in the United States will continue to be a major problem for immigrants in the next decades.

African immigration will continue as long as America is still perceived as the land of economic upward mobility. How the future really will look for these new African immigrants will depend on their individual plans, and whether the cultural gap between the American society, the African Americans and the Africans can be closed by finding some common ground and a way to share resources instead of stereotyping about each other. The foundations of functionalism set down by Durkheim were later built on by other writers including A. R. Radcliff -Brown (1881-1955) who was quite clear about the meaning of functionalism when he stated: As the word function is here being used the life of an organism is conceived as the functioning of its structure.

It is through and by the continuity of the functioning of an organism that the continuity of the structure is preserved. If we consider any recurrent part of the life process, such as respiration, digestion, etc. , its function is the part it plays in, the contribution it makes to the life of the organism as a whole. "

He emphasized the structural resemblance between social life and organisms even more clearly than Durkheim and it was this that gave rise to the term structural-functionalism.

For many sociologists, the focus on ethnicity shifts from ethnic group conflict to the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity. One exemplary statement of the constructivist position is presented by Conzen et al. (1992), who argue that ethnic identity should not be viewed as ancient, unchanging,

or inherent in a group's blood, soul, or misty past; nor be reduced to a rational means-ends calculation of those intent on manipulating it for political or economic ends.

Even later than Radcliff-Brown, K. Davis and W. E. Moore (1967) explained how social inequality is necessary to motivate the more talented members of society to train to fulfill the demands of social positions which are functionally more important than others. They list the rank order of positions as religion, government, wealth and technical knowledge and point out that only a limited number of people have the talents which can be turned into the skills needed for these positions.

This takes training which means social and financial sacrifices are made, so in order to encourage people to undergo this training, and to endure the demands of the future position itself, they are given certain privileges. This may include access to scarce resources such as property, power and prestige. This access to scarce resources produces stratification but also inequality in the amount of resources allocated to different people. This inequality is both functional and inevitable. Where functionalism uses consensus, shared norms and values and concepts such as order, harmony, cohesion and integration, Marxism takes a different view.

The Marxist perspective concentrates on the differences between groups and concepts such as control, conflict, power, domination and exploitation. This is the theory based on the work of Karl Marx (1818-1883) in close collaboration with Fredrick Engels (1820-1895) over a period of more than forty years. Karl Marx felt that social class was the main form of inequality and saw only two

significant social classes. He maintained that it was capitalist industrialization that led to this “two class” society, the bourgeoisie who owned the means of production (e. g. factories) and the proletariat who became the wage laborers (working in the factories).

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another.....” (Marx and Engels. 1848) The Declaration of Independence teaches American citizens “All men are created equal.” Through this ideal, we infer that we each have an equal opportunity to live “The American Dream” of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Despite laws that date back to the constitution of the United States of America, racial equality is still absent from today’s society. Only those who choose not to look believe that humankind has evolved to a standard that does not judge based on skin color, or ethnic background. We only need to recall the dozens of black churches that were burned in the south during the early nineties, or remember that a black man was dragged to his death behind a pickup truck and even the Native American beat to death by a man with a baseball bat, both victims of a vicious hate crime not even five years ago.

Social scientists tend to have different theoretical perspectives about the study of race and ethnic relations. Unfortunately, most textbooks spend little if any time discussing their own theories, much less competing theories. This makes it difficult for students to be able to critically analyze any given

author's point of view. By analyzing significant acts that have occurred since the Declaration of Independence, it will become obvious that the plight of the minority in the United States is only slightly better than it was one hundred years ago.

From the very beginnings of American history it is evident that the masses, white men and women, were not concerned with the rights and liberties of minorities. The Declaration of Independence that so many of us have learned about is actually a revised version of an original draft. The revised version is only a declaration of partial independence, claiming freedom for those settlers that happened to be white, male, and landowners. How unfortunate that the founding fathers, struggling to break free of foreign oppression, allowed that same oppression to occur on American soil.

The original draft of the Declaration of Independence contained the following excerpt, " He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur a miserable death in their transportation hither. " Here the forefathers are publicly criticizing the King of Britain for allowing slavery to occur, and rightly so.

Waldinger and Perlman outline, the fact that the immigrant experiences of the past apply mostly to immigrants that came from southern and eastern Europe whereas the contemporary immigrants come mainly from Asia, the Caribbean, and other continents. The comparison of the contemporary immigrants does not address the problem of the visibly identifiable

immigrants of today. " Today's newcomers are visibly identifiable and enter a mainly white society still not cured of its racist affliction" (pg 223).

Conclusion The Constitution of the United States very clearly reads that all men are created equal but had to be rewritten in order to ensure that civil life would not be disrupted; for, the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness only applied to the white, land owning male of that time. The United States found itself engaged in a Civil War, with slavery being one of the issues of conflict. The Civil War brought about desperately needed changes to the Constitution, and America saw the beginning of what some would call the civil rights movement when the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments were added.

The thirteenth amendment, ratified at the end of the civil war, freed all slaves. Though not covered in class, the fourteenth, ratified in 1868, made former slaves, and anyone else born in the U. S. , legal citizens. Officially, blacks were American citizens, and black males had the right to vote. The results felt in society, however, were much different. Many blacks were threatened with their lives if they stepped into a voting booth, and were still viewed by most of the public as less than human.

Blacks were paid much less than white workers for similar jobs, and had to put up with much abuse in order to keep the demeaning job. Unless an effort is made to stop discrimination, it will continue to spread and consume America from the inside out. A country as great as the United States, that has the power to thwart wrongdoing on all corners of the globe, but cannot

ensure that all of its citizens will be treated fairly, and not judged on the color of skin.

The plight of the minority has become better as the years have passed, and for the most part, men and women of minorities can walk down the street without fear of vicious attacks based on race, and it is now illegal to deny service to an individual based on skin color, but it was also illegal in 1963. When one starts life as another's property, any positive change in that people's social position can be made to look monumental. America was founded based on a theory of equal rights for all, and the words of the Constitution of the United States should apply to every man, woman, and child, but still today they do not.

If Americans cannot live together in harmony, it will be the destruction of the mightiest country ever formed. Functionalist theories state that education meets the needs of the industrial society as well as the cultural society and has the important role of socializing the individual to fit into, and continue, the social system. Individuals are born into a society that already has an identity of its own and education has the function of passing on shared values and skills.

They see that education not only responds to the demands of employers by preparing people for various jobs, which in turn produces economic growth and further investment in education, but also transmits culture through religious education, history and literature and teaches appropriate roles for age, gender and class. Marxists believe that education enforces the inequalities of wealth and income, and the attitudes and values of members

of different classes. They see that education could transform children into “simple articles of commerce and instruments of labor” by being the wage laborers of the future.

They are kept in their place by schools which are seen as introducing and reproducing the inequalities of social class, making them appear normal so that the working class are hardly aware of them and therefore in a state of false consciousness. Race and ethnicity are still major issues that cause barriers for immigrants and prevent socio economic upward mobility. Unlike the earlier European immigrants who encountered discriminations and were later viewed as white, the contemporary immigrants are more visible and cannot disappear in the mainstream.

The problem is that ethnic conflicts are rarely, if ever, that simple. Individual ethnic entrepreneurs may be motivated as much by self-interest as they are by the power of emotional appeals to land, the blood, and a search for peoplehood. Individuals in groups are far more national animals than rational ones. The instrumentalist perspective of structural functionalists, neo-Marxists, and mainstream political scientists is simply unable to address the emotional, non-rational dimensions of ethnic conflicts.