

Aspects of Ethnic Identity in Canada

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Introduction

Research on ethnic groups in Canada started around the turn of this century. At that time assimilation was the aim of public policy directed at those immigrants who were considered to be a social and economic problem to Canada. Central and eastern Europeans and Orientals were at first considered inassimilable to Canada as they were racially and culturally inferior. When a more liberal view maintaining "...immigrant social problems...were the result of social conditions, rather than individual failings" appeared, those immigrants instead became the main targets of an assimilationist policy, which was to "Canadianize and protestantize" them (Palmer, 1977: 168-9). Ethnic sentiment still had a negative connotation under the liberal assimilationism: class was considered to be the basis of inequality and thus individual rights and equality based on universalism were the desired social goals. In the post-World War II era, especially since the 1970s, the dominant approach to ethnicity has changed from that of the assimilationist denying the significance of ethnicity to that of the pluralist accepting or even celebrating the significance of ethnicity.

Recently attention has been given to aspects of ethnic identity such as ethnic self identification and ethnic political association that appear to persist after cultural assimilation.

In the following literature on ethnic identity is reviewed: four major aspects of ethnic identity along with the assumptions about minority ethnic group members are identified and explored.

As S. Thernstrom *et al.* state: "...there is yet no consensus about the precise meaning of ethnicity....Ethnicity is an immensely complex phenomenon" (1980: v-vi). Accordingly, various meanings of ethnicity are evident in the historical development of the studies of ethnicity and also in the broad range of approaches to studies on ethnicity today. Studies of ethnicity are found in a variety of disciplines such as biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science etc. and their foci and methodologies are diverse (Palmer, 1977: 174-6; Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980: vii). In this study the concept ethnic identity is defined in terms of a sociological framework. And four aspects of ethnic identity—race, common culture, identity and political actions—are included. The former two aspects namely race and common culture reflect earlier notions of ethnicity. These notions of ethnicity assumes that an ethnic group is identifiable objectively. As Kallen notes:

...ethnicity was conceived as an attribute of an organized and cohesive ethnic group whose members shared distinctive biocultural attributes which they transmitted from generation to generation through the processes of inbreeding (intra-ethnic mating) and enculturation (distinctive ethnic socialization) (1982: 58).

Some ethnic groups in Canada are more cohesive than others and at

some times more so than at other times. Most members of minorities in Canada, however, go through acculturation, and in some cases, do not even possess ethnic cultural characteristics, but they are often considered by the dominant groups as cohesive, unassimilating and thus problematic.

The latter two aspects, namely identity and political actions, are newer notions of ethnicity. Modern technology has promoted interaction of peoples in the world, which causes two seemingly paradoxical phenomena with respect to ethnic identity, namely cultural uniformity and salience of ethnicity. Focusing on today's massive international migration and development of instant satellite communications, Kallen states:

...while these developments have increasingly muted or eroded former cultural differences between human populations and have generated a certain degree of cultural uniformity at the international level, at the same time they appear to have heightened the salience of ethnic differentiation both within and among modern states (1982: 59).

It is this heightened salience of differentiation, despite increasing cultural uniformity, that brought "a more subjective frame of reference" to the study of ethnicity (Kallen, 1982: 58). The rise of identity and political action based on ethnicity is not, in fact, paradoxical to increased inter-ethnic interaction, first because interaction is likely to cause conflicts as well as uniformity, and second because many individuals are now secure enough to place the ethnic issue in forefront.

In this paper, these aspects of ethnic identity are examined in four categories roughly in their historical order of appearance in

ethnic studies. These concepts are by no means exclusive of one another. In fact, identity may be based on racial or cultural characteristics and culture may be a focus of political interest to mention but a few examples.

1. Biological Aspect

As the original meaning of ethnicity indicated race (Petersen, 1980: 234-5), a biological criterion of human grouping, race is still a part of meaning of ethnicity. Van den Berghe, for example, defines ethnicity as "an extension of kinship" and explains persistence of ethnicity as a genetic function of kin selection (1981: 239). The two terms—ethnicity and race, however, have developed their own meanings separate from each other. The commonly used meaning and emphasis of the term race was established in the eighteenth century "to indicate major divisions of humankind by stressing certain common physical characteristics such as skin color" (Hughes, 1982: 3). There are various ways of classifying human species, but among human species three basic kinds of races are identified in terms of physical characteristics: Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid (Hughes, 1982: 6). A racial category is an ideal type and does not represent a real group of people. As D. Hughes notes:

...there is no such thing as pure race. Rather, racial differences are relative phenomena indicated by greater or lesser frequencies of particular genes, rather than by their absolute presence or absence" (1982: 6).

In spite of the established biological meaning and its relative nature, the term race has still been confused with an ethnic group and the behavioural pattern of the group members, which Hughes calls

"...erroneous connecting of physical attributes with behavioral and other cultural traits..." (1982: 3). Thus, however erroneous, race as physical characteristics can be a factor in the definition of an ethnic group and its misuse is racism. Racism—the use of supposed racial differences as a tool for unjust treatment of other human beings—is a social problem. Even van den Berghe, while defending the genetic explanation of persistence of ethnicity and racism, recognizes situational factors behind the phenomenon (1981: 261). According to Rex:

When...biologists concluded that differences had no relevance to the political differences and conflicts among men, sociologists were called upon to look at the structural contexts in which racist ideas flourished (1986: 71).

Even after biological inequality and inassimilability among racial categories were disproved, however, belief in social inequality and inassimilability among them persisted. Following the conflict paradigm, Rex points to race as an aspect of ethnic identity as he describes the structural contexts in which it exists:

...the differences said to be racial were better described as 'ethnic'....Unfortunately, too often, when this line was taken, ethnic differentiation was treated as a benign phenomenon. What was left out was the element essential to the understanding of racism, namely that ethnic groups sometimes had identities imposed on them to restrict their mobility and to facilitate their exploitation and oppression (1986: 71).

Whether biological or social, race is a category based on imposed ascription on a person by others. When racial inequality in itself became unjustifiable, the blame was shifted to cultural traits of such

people.

2. Socio-Cultural Aspect

In the first half of the twentieth century assimilability of certain immigrant groups was doubted based on their racial or cultural inferiority which was believed to be transmitted genetically (Palmer, 1977: 168-9). Although severe prejudice and discrimination especially against visible minorities persisted until after World War II, tolerance toward non-British immigrant groups developed gradually and the view of immigrant ethnic groups also changed. In a 1936 study by Dawson, "For the first time group characteristics were attributed to culture, rather than to biology" (Palmer, 1977: 171-2).

Culture is a set of patterns of thought and action. Thus, both attitudes and behaviour constitute culture. As Breton defines it, culture includes "values and norms" and "customs and ways of doing things" (1983: 7). Although culture is a broadly used term including class culture, status culture, and regional culture, culture here refers to ethnic culture. The assumption under the cultural definition of ethnicity is the presence of a closely knit community where members of an ethnic group are encultured and share an everyday life. When one focuses on immigrants leading a closely knit community life, cultural characteristics such as language and customs are easily observable. This, the assimilationists considered the problem that immigrants had brought to the host society. For the succeeding generations, loss of such traditional culture and community life were considered the indicators of assimilation to the larger society. Studies on cultural maintenance dealt with various aspects of culture, but they usually included patterns of behaviour in intra-group contacts and traditional

culture of an ethnic group. Thus, questions were asked on factors relating to cultural maintenance such as endogamy, choice of friends, language fluency and use, use of ethnic media, religious practice, participation in ethnic organizations, foods etc. (Driedger, 1989: 148-55).

These studies focusing on traditional culture and community life found that the degree and kinds of cultural loss depend on the group and also individual characteristics such as generation and socio-economic status. Moreover, a new phenomenon—a resurgence of ethnicity—appeared when individuals seemed to have assimilated to the larger society, having lost traditional culture and community life of their ancestors. Frequently cited is Hansen's third generation return, which points to the resurgence of interest in the ancestors' history and culture in the third generation of immigrants in America. Petersen summarizes the phenomenon: "...what the son wanted to forget, the grandson wanted to remember" (1980: 239). Other causes of a resurgence of ethnicity are the social climate and the state policy. It has simply become acceptable to talk about ethnicity. Petersen states:

Why, contrary to almost every informed opinion, have recent years seen a reassertion of ethnicity?....First, one should note that almost all the earlier doctrines—whether the melting pot or Marxism—typically evolved as support for a political position rather than as a purely objective analysis of the trend in interethnic relations. Even as ethnic identity was becoming more significant in the United States, attempts were being made, in conformance with national policy, to disguise the very existence of racial differences (1980: 238).

While deviation from total assimilation is evident in the resurgence of

ethnicity, what seems to be reviving is not exact repeat of the immigrant ancestors' way of life. In fact, resurgence of ethnicity provides the opportunity to closely look at the mechanism of ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is not a sum of common cultural patterns but it involves a subjective assessment of identity of an individual.

Isajiw notes that two approaches to the definition of ethnicity, namely objective and subjective, "reflect the two general theoretical trends in contemporary social sciences, the structural and the phenomenological methodologies" (1980: 17). In the same framework Juteau-Lee distinguishes objectively defined ethnicity as "the so-called 'givens', such as biological traits and kinship ties, or elements of material culture, ways of acting, and behaving" and subjectively defined ethnicity as "individual identity and consciousness" (1984: 190-1).

Earlier, the objective definition of ethnic identity was predominant in ethnic studies, and accordingly the criteria for defining ethnicity were external characteristics of individuals such as "racial features...and cultural attributes" (Anderson, 1982: 6). For some, cultural assimilation to the larger society, however, does not necessarily eliminate their subjective identity (Isajiw, 1980: 22-3). For others, the individuals themselves may not even identify themselves according to their origin but they are identified by others as such, which is common among visible minorities and Mischlings—children of Jew and Gentile labelled by others as Jewish (Epstein, 1978: 102). With the subjective approach, the mechanism of ethnic identity, otherwise unexplained, becomes clearer. The following section deals with this subjective approach to ethnic identity. Subjective ethnic identity, however, does not necessarily exclude objectively defined ethnic

identity such as race, language, food etc. Subjective ethnic identity, in fact, may be based on the objective components of ethnic identity.

3. Psychological Aspect

Reflecting on European nation-states as ethnic groups, Weber takes a subjective view of formation of ethnic groups. According to Weber, an ethnic group is a status group and formation of a status group is made subjectively by "mutual consent" (1978a: 49). While allowing physical, cultural, or historical factors as possible reasons for the belief in common descent, Weber maintains a subjective approach to ethnicity. According to Weber:

We shall call "ethnic groups" those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists (1978b: 389).

Therefore, Weber denies the biological explanation of ethnicity as van den Berghe does. Weber says subjective nature of the concept:

Ethnic membership (*Gemeinsamkeit*) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action, like the latter (1978b: 389).

Weber's subjective approach is focused on self identity—identity by the party within the ethnic category. For many immigrants to North America, however, ethnic consciousness starts developing when they come to a new country and experience cultural differences or discri-

mination (Palmer, 1977: 177). Moreover, ethnic consciousness does not remain as an immigrant problem. The psychological aspect of ethnic identity has become the focus of attention with the observation that subjective identity and maintenance of traditional culture appear to be separate phenomena. Breton, Burnet, Hartmann, Isajiw, and Lenards in "The Impact of Ethnic Groups on Canadian Society" deny the assimilationists' assumption that ethnicity eventually disappears. Breton *et al.* maintain that: "Ethnicity presents itself as a problem of self definition, that is, of identity. In this sense cultural assimilation may create rather than eliminate the problem of ethnic identity." (1977: 197).

Isajiw defines ethnicity for North America in a combination of objective and subjective approaches. According to Isajiw, ethnicity refers to:

an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group (1980: 24).

At the objective stage of definition Isajiw regards ethnicity as a real group, which is involuntary in nature and based on common culture. Isajiw states: "...a person is born into a group which shares certain cultural traits and therefore becomes socialized into them" (1980: 21). At the subjective stage of definition Isajiw notes that subjective identification by self and/or others may occur regardless of maintenance of traditional culture. Anderson uses two kinds of definition of ethnicity; definition "from the standpoint of the outside observer or from that of the ethnic individual"(6). Others also see this dichotomy of definition as "self-other" (Hughes and Kallen, 1974: 85). A discrepancy

may exist between self-defined ethnicity and what others see. The development of ideas on ethnicity has led us to the point where ethnicity is conceptualized in terms of subjective beliefs rather than just visible customs or common physical characteristics. It is clear that self identification with an ethnic group and identification by others are not necessarily the same. Isajiw presents three kinds of subjective definition as self, others or both (1980: 10) and recognizes mutual stimulation between the self and the others (1980: 24). Epstein also notes: "In a polyethnic situation...the sense of ethnic identity is always in some degree a product of the interaction of inner perception and outer response, of forces operating on the individual and group from within, and those impinging on them from without" (1978: 101-102).

Subjective identity is an attitude. Attitudes have valence—either positive or negative. There is a view that self-identity is positive and identity by others is negative (Makabe, 1978: 106). Self-imposed negative identity as well as other-imposed positive identity, however, also exist. The former is evident in stigma members of dominated group may have; the latter is, or at least was, common in the respect for things English and the privileges Americans received in Canada (Burnet, 1981: 28-30).

In response to the phenomenon of a resurgence of ethnicity is a view that assimilation is in progress and such a phenomenon, if occurring, does not interfere with daily life. Dealing with third and fourth generation Americans of European descent, thus excluding racial minorities, Gans calls the phenomenon "symbolic ethnicity" (1979). According to Gans:

...a new kind of ethnic involvement may be occurring, which emphasizes concern with identity, with the feeling

of being Jewish or Italian, etc. Since ethnic identity needs are neither intense nor frequent in this generation, however, ethnics do not need either ethnic cultures or organizations; instead, they resort to the use ethnic symbols (1979: 1).

Gans rejects the economic and political function of ethnicity because he regards it as relevant only for poorer segments of society (1979: 4) and suggests:

...as the functions of ethnic cultures and groups diminish and identity becomes the primary way of being ethnic, ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people's lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity and losing its relevance, say, to earning a living or regulating family life (1979: 9).

Thus, symbolic ethnicity, according to Gans, is based on ethnic awareness, is only expressive, and does not require commitment. And interestingly, while discussing various forms of symbolic ethnicity appearing in America and the liberal social climate for their appearance, Gans concludes: "...symbolic ethnicity cannot be considered as evidence either of a third generation return or a revival" (1979: 17).

Like Gans's view of symbolic ethnicity, Weinfeld regards ethnicity as an "affective" attribute and does not recognize its substance in real life:

Ethnic identities are good things, all more or less equal—all link an individual to a past, a history, a heritage. Yet ethnicity's strength would seem to be its weakness, its marginality to the central concerns facing post-industrial humans—occupation, choice of spouse and friends, place to

live, language, etc. Ethnicity becomes an "affective" attribute, lending distinctiveness to individual identity when most roads to achievement and social acceptance seem those of conformity and convention (1981: 93).

The above studies focus on the psychological aspect of ethnic identity and suggest psychological ethnic identity may remain after cultural assimilation. But one must ask. Is ethnic identity nostalgic or attitudinal? Petersen notes:

...it would be fanciful to suppose...that the rise of ethnicity in the United States and throughout most of the world was due solely to a postponed search for roots. Obviously more is at stake than sentiment" (1980: 239).

Juteau-Lee describes the recent view of ethnicity and states:

Ethnicity is no longer being viewed as a natural attribute, an essence that gives birth to unalterable behavioural patterns and to primordial ties....Since ethnic ties are no longer considered as inevitable, it follows that their explanation is imperative. Ethnicity is a social fact, and as such, it must be explained in terms of another social fact (1984: 191).

Although primordial ethnic sentiment may well exist in contemporary society, one cannot ignore ethnic consciousness in relation to the structural factors of the society. In fact, the political aspect of ethnic identity, that is political consciousness and action for the own group, would be inevitable if assimilation is truly progressing as Gans maintains. When members of an ethnic group are assimilated to a society such as Canada whose culture values democratic rights, they are likely to become aware of their rights. Then, their ethnic together with

political consciousness may also rise.

4. Political Aspect

Juteau-Lee's notion of *groupes nationalitaires* is relevant to the question of political ethnicity. According to Juteau-Lee, ethnic groups remain in the sphere of tradition where they are concerned with reproduction (1984: 195). On the other hand, there are groups which exert an action in the political sphere where they become bearers of their history. Such groups are differentiated into two types: *groupes nationalitaires* and nations; the first do not question the legitimacy of the state while the second control the state (1984: 195). Ethnic groups exercising a political action within the Canadian state are *groupes nationalitaires*, and this is the orientation of political action we now deal with. As Isajiw suggests, "the dichotomy of private and public spheres" (1978: 36) is important in analyzing ethnicity. The private sphere is within an ethnic community or an individual, whereas ethnicity in relation to power in the larger society is in the public sphere. Some ethnic group activities have an impact not only within the ethnic community but also in the larger society. Accordingly, the approach to ethnicity has also been modified. We now shift our attention from inside the ethnic community or individuals to the larger society. We deal with ethnicity in the public sphere.

Strong focuses on the political aspect of ethnicity and states:

...the salience of ethnicity in industrial societies is related to the use of ethnicity by social actors as a political resource in social conflict over the structural allocation and distribution of resources within an industrialized democratic state (1984: iv).

It is an aspiration for power rather than the actual power that an ethnic group holds that brings public recognition of ethnic issues. Conversely an ethnic group needs power in the first place to bring itself to the public sphere. Isajiw notes, "Ethnicity in North American societies has come to be relegated to the private sphere...", but he maintains "...the more power an ethnic group has in society, the closer it will be to the public sphere" (1978: 36-37). Reitz also finds the above pattern in his data of urban ethnic groups:

In the South European and Chinese communities (those of lowest status), ethnic identification tends to undermine participation in Canadian politics. For those who have stayed attached to higher status groups, ethnic origin is virtually irrelevant in determining political participation (228).

The above idea, conversely, suggests that emergence of political ethnicity itself may be a sign of growing ethnic group power.

Weber considers an ethnic group a particular from of a status group. In Weber's definition ethnicity is subjectively determined and its function is political as exemplified by European nationalism (Isajiw, 1980: 13). Weber maintains that differences in race or culture are not the ultimate determinants of ethnic identity, but rather it is political beliefs that matter. In many modern societies in the world, however, ethnicity and state are not the same. For example, countries such as Canada and the U. S. A. are known for their ethnic diversity and an ethnic group is perceived not as a state but as a subgroup of a larger society (Theodorson, 1969: 135). The idea that ethnic groups exist within a larger society, however, does not deny political power they may exercise within the society. Glazer and Moynihan state:

...*interest* is pursued effectively by *ethnic groups* today as well as by *interest*-defined groups....since each group had a different history, these groups were differently distributed in the various social positions of society. As a result, the ethnic group *could* become a focus of mobilization for the pursuit of group or individual interests (1975: 7-8).

In Canada ethnic ties may be strengthened by affirmation of the principles of legal acceptance and social desirability of ethnic origin (Weinfeld, 1981). Isajiw mentions the effect of multiculturalism in shifting the issue of ethnicity from the private sphere to the public. According to Isajiw:

The Multiculturalism movement, as a political movement, seeks public recognition for ethnic groups as part of the total society. Hence, what the ethnic rediscoverers are doing, in effect, is attempting to bring community itself out of the private sphere (1978: 37).

In "Ethnic Identity Retention", a study of both external (behavioural) and internal (attitudinal) aspects of ethnic identity of some major ethnic groups in Toronto, Isajiw shows: "...in all generations large percentages of ethnic identity retention cannot be explained by socialization alone" (1981: 85). The above finding indicates the need for consideration of factors other than the characteristics of the family or ethnic community concerning the retention of ethnic identity. Moreover, ethnic identity is not a one-way phenomenon of retained or lost, but it may appear among those who lost it once. Ethnicity is not a static concept, but a dynamic one. As Juteau-Lee notes: "Ethnic ties appear, disappear, and reappear" (1984: 191).

This paper outlined four major aspects of ethnic identity as a

complex sociological variable. It also detailed the assumptions about minority ethnic group members in Canadian history. In a multi-ethnic society, where understanding differences is necessary for peaceful coexistence, recognition of aspects of ethnic identity is important in dealing with social issues concerning welfare and rights of people.

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