

A Literature Review of the Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Ethnic Identity

浦 田 葉 子

Key Words

socio-economic status

ethnic identity

affective ethnicity

political ethnicity

resource allocation

Introduction

Contradictory findings about the relationship between socio-economic status and ethnic identity exist. One factor that needs to be considered is the variety of meanings given to ethnic identity in the literature. In the following, theoretical and empirical studies are examined to clarify the concept of ethnic identity and its relationship to socio-economic status.

1. Socio-Economic Status and Ethnic Identity as Separate Concepts

Van den Berghe maintains that class and ethnicity are independent of each other. According to van den Berghe: "The two principal modes of collective organization in complex societies are ethnicity and class. The former is based on some notion of common kinship; the latter on common interest" (1981:241).

Following the Weberian perspective, an ethnic group is a status group. Although ethnic stratification has existed in various degrees, the class situation an ethnic group faces should be analytically separated from their ethnicity itself. The meaning and usage of the terms class and status are not uniform in the sociological literature. As Polenberg notes: ". . . ever since Max Weber first criticized Marxist theory, sociologists have differed sharply over the meaning of class and its relationship to status and power" (1980:8). According to Weber, class division is made objectively according to the nature of property and services, while the formation of status groups is made subjectively by "mutual consent" (1978: 49). From another perspective, "a class itself is not a community" (Weber, 1978: 46), but a status group is a community which can be grasped. For Weber, status groups unlike classes are normally communities, though often of an amorphous kind where status evaluation is "based on some common characteristics shared by many people" (1978: 48). While the content of shared characteristics is discussed somewhat ambiguously as "some common characteristics", the process of status formation is clearly described by Weber as "an action based on mutual consent" (1978: 49). According to Weber, status groups and classes are interrelated through the medium of

power. A status group may control certain economic power, while status may be achieved via the class route. Weber's analysis of economic factors, which is found in the relation between class and status groups is useful in the study. As Gerth and Mills put it, a distinction is made between "economic," "economically determined," and "economically relevant" (1958: 47). Status groups are independent of purely economic classes while they may reflect economic factors. In consequence, achieved socio-economic status may not only give minority individuals economic power but also lead them to political and social power.

In the following section, studies of the relationship between socio-economic status and ethnic identity are reviewed. The phenomenon, however, is complex. Van den Berghe states:

. . . . the interplay of class and ethnicity is probably the most difficult problem facing the analysis of complex societies. Empirically, a complete range of situations is found, (1981: 244).

2. The Primacy of Ethnic Identity or Socio-Economic Status

As described previously, studies of inequality in society take ethnic identity as an independent variable. It is presumed that what hinders individual social mobility is minority culture and group cohesion. Porter takes this view (1980: 328). The interpretation of Marxists is the reverse: ethnicity is used as a mark of exploitation and it is economic inequality not ethnicity itself that is to be blamed. Thus, ethnic stratification is reducible to class. When the relationship between socio-economic status and ethnicity is positive,

the functional interpretation holds that individual merit, not ethnicity, is the basis for economic merit.

It is necessary to consider the context of the relationship between socio-economic status and ethnicity when one investigates this relationship. Van den Berghe maintains:

. . . it is impossible and unwise to declare that one factor is more important than the other. The relative salience of class and ethnicity varies from case to case, and from time to time (1981: 244).

In Canada today the relationship between class and ethnicity is neither zero nor perfect. Neither class nor ethnicity determines each other, yet each has some influence on the other.

Contrary to Porter's vertical mosaic thesis, the role of ethnicity as a determinant of life chances is declining in Canada (Darroch, 1979; Brym, 1989: 107,109). Li supports this view by stating: "Although ethnicity makes a difference in Canada, it cannot be said, on the basis of the 1981 Census data, that social class is determined by ethnicity" (1988:139).

Pineo finds that higher consensus is acquired in ranking among occupations than ranking among ethnic groups in his sample of respondents and states:

In so far as the assumption that consensus (and knowledge) imply social importance is valid, the ranking of ethnic and racial groupings appears to be a less crucial element in Canadian social structure than the ranking of occupations (1977:157).

Goldstein supports Pineo's findings. Goldstein measures the importance of three indicators of social standing -- ethnicity,

occupation, and nativity—and finds in his western Canadian sample: “. . . the occupation of the target person accounted for roughly twice the variations in social standing ratings that could be accounted by ethnicity . . .” (1988:66).

Based on the above reasoning and findings, the relationship between socio-economic status and ethnic identity is reconsidered. When ethnicity is considered to be the independent variable, it commonly indicates ethnic origin or status group, which is examined as the source of socio-economic inequality between ethnic categories (Porter, 1965; Darroch, 1979; Li, 1988). Despite the fact that ethnicity as the determinant of socio-economic status does not hold as widely as before, the relationship between them does seem to exist. When ethnicity is the dependent variable, ethnicity indicates a wide range of aspects of ethnicity such as traditional cultural maintenance and subjective identity of individuals to association for a political action. In the following, studies having ethnic identity as a dependent variable are reviewed.

3. Ethnic Identity as a Dependent Variable

Previous studies put forward opposing views about the relationship between socio-economic status and ethnic identity. Sometimes this relationship is negative; sometimes it is positive.

Some studies have shown assimilationist pattern in that measures of ethnic identity tend to vary inversely with the individual's socio-economic status. Makabe investigated ethnic identity of Nisei in Toronto. She examined the relationship between ethnic identity and mobility measured as inter-generational occupational mobility

and residential mobility. A composite measure of ethnic identity involved five components—ethnic socialization, language retention, involvement and participation in ethnic institution and organizations, in-group friendship choice, and subjective ethnic identity. Makabe's finding is that: “. . . ethnic group identity is weakened with social mobility” (1979:136).

O' Bryan, Reitz and Kuplowska studied ten non-charter ethnic groups in five Canadian cities in *Non-Official Languages: A Study in Canadian Multiculturalism* (1976) and found that level of education generally has a weak but negative relationship to knowledge and support for retention of non-official languages although the relationship differs among generations and from group to group (49, 50, 108, 109, 157).

Reitz provides empirical evidence of a negative relationship between socio-economic status and ethnic identity. In *The Survival of Ethnic Groups* (1980) Reitz, using data from the study *Non-Official Languages* (O' Bryan *et al.*, 1976) measured ethnic group attachment with in-group interaction and ethnic identification, measured socio-economic status with job status and income, and found that “The maintenance of group ties in the middle class is about a third less frequent than in the working class” (186).

Weinfeld (1981) found an assimilationist pattern of ethnic identity in terms of generation and education for a sample of Slavic, Jewish and Italian householders in Toronto:

Measures of ethnic residential segregation, ethnic language use, involvement in the ethnic community, ethnic homogeneity of friendship networks and social distance, are in general negatively associated with native birth and high education

(80).

Studies of people of Japanese origin in North America show assimilation progressing among them. Montero examined data from a three-generational study of Japanese Americans collected in the mid 1960s and found that “. . . on every indicator of assimilation it is the socioeconomically successful Nisei who are the most cut off from the ethnic community” (1980: 88). Montero equated assimilation with the loss of ethnic contacts. According to Montero’s findings, socio-economic achievement in education and occupation was associated with loss of contacts with Japanese relatives, not choosing Japanese organizations as their favourite, choosing non-Japanese as best friends, and choosing a non-Japanese spouse (1980: 81-3).

There is a contrasting view that individuals with high socio-economic status retain or tend to have high ethnic identity, which is described below.

4. Affective Ethnicity

Some attitudinal aspects of ethnic identity, such as ethnic self identity labels and salience of ethnic identity, appear to remain after behavioural assimilation into the larger society. Some scholars postulate that these aspects of ethnic identity remain because they are without commitment and without conflict with more important material aspects of everyday life.

Makabe (1978) interviewed 100 Nisei in Toronto and found that 66% of the respondents had a dual identity comprised of “Japanese - Canadian” or “Canadian first, Japanese Second” (112). Analyzing the responses qualitatively, Makabe finds respondents with such

double ethnic identity positive in their response, whereas she finds those who define themselves “simply Canadian” or “Japanese” negative. Makabe suggests:

. . . economic mobility has not necessarily weakened ethnic subjective awareness. The mobile Nisei have achieved financial and psychological security, and this security is reflected in their subjective ethnic identification. They claim that they would rather be both Japanese and Canadian than to be exclusively one or the other (1978: 119).

Exceptions were found within the general findings of assimilationist patterns between socio-economic status and ethnic identity. Weinfeld studied ethnic identification of Jews, Slavs and Italians living in Toronto and first found an assimilationist pattern that “high levels of ethnic identification are associated with immigrant status and lower levels of education” (1981: 92). Weinfeld, however, also found in the same study:

Many native-born Torontonians with above-average educational attainment select an ethnic-origin label and indicate attitudinal support for the principles of multiculturalism (1981: 92).

Finding behavioural assimilation to the larger society on the one hand and a pluralist attitude on the other hand, Weinfeld suggests:

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).

Another study by H. Z. Borowski shows that, contrary to the assimilationist view, the 1980 Self-Identification Study conducted in Edmonton “did not support the view that high ranking on the

socio-economic variables [education, occupation, and income] would be associated with Canadian Identification" (1981: 73). In the 1978 Edmonton Area Study, Borowski also found a similar result that neither education nor occupation were related to ethnic self-identification (1981: 73).

What may explain these exceptions to assimilationist patterns? Breton *et al.* suggest:

. . . for many immigrants ethnic identity may develop within, rather than outside of the host society. Likewise, under some conditions increased social mobility may stimulate rather than diminish ethnic consciousness (1977: 197).

Weinfeld suggests that a disjunction exists between behavioural and attitudinal indicators of ethnic identification and that "ethnic self-identification" is "less likely to vary as assimilationists postulate" (1981:80). Weinfeld points out that, for some ethnic group members, socio-economic status even relates positively to attitudinal ethnic identity. Weinfeld, however, does not mention what behaviour or action may follow from that ethnic identity.

Reitz examined the strength of ethnic group cohesion in *The Survival of Ethnic Groups* (1980). Reitz's measure of ethnic identity includes both an attitude that is ethnic identification, and behaviour that is in-group interaction. While finding an overall negative relationship between socio-economic status and the above indicators of ethnic identity, Reitz suggests that a substantial proportion of middle-class people have high ethnic group attachment. Reitz states as:

Many people who hold reasonably high level jobs nevertheless keep ties to a minority ethnic community; they do this not

only by identifying with the community, but also through many formal and informal relationships (1980: 186).

Contrary to scholars who presume that economic factors are only significant to heightened ethnicity among the working class, Reitz points to the economic dimension of ethnic identity among the middle class such as economic segregation of the Jews and job discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin (1980: 180-4). Ethnic minorities, especially visible minorities, are the easy target of job discrimination. And individuals in the middle class are not necessarily free from discrimination because they may still be considered inferior by the dominant group members or, if not considered inferior, they may be a likely cause of insecurity in the dominant group members who now have to compete against them on the equal grounds. According to Reitz, “. . . members of a group may become more sensitive to discrimination once they have achieved middle-class status than they are in the working class” (1980: 184). If socio-economic achievement of ethnic minorities is accompanied by cultural assimilation, including belief in the democratic principle of Canada, discrimination would certainly hit those in the middle class harder.

5. Political Ethnicity

Unlike the view that ethnic identity is subjectively important but not the central concern of life, studies focusing on the political aspects of ethnic identity recognize its significance. Ethnic identity here is not simply a trivial residue from the past as the functionalists assume, but is a factor in the control of resource allocation in

society. Two kinds of resources are identified—material and symbolic.

Conflicts based on ethnic lines exist in both the United States and Canada. The phenomenon, however, has contrasting interpretations in the two countries. In the United States ethnic conflicts are often considered as a working-class phenomenon because Blacks struggling for economic and political power dominate attention. When the phenomenon of middle-class ethnicity such as ethnic revival or symbolic ethnicity is recognized, it is considered unrelated to economic or political interest and explained in terms of cultural interest. In Canada ethnic conflicts are often considered as a middle-class phenomenon and having economic and political impact because of the most articulated problem of the French-English relations (Gans, 1979; Clairmont & Wien, 1980:309; Reitz, 1980: 180,184). Reitz suggests:

In Canada, to a greater extent than in the U.S., middle-class ethnic cohesion may be given impetus by a class-like conflict with other groups, rather than by cultural forces *per se* (1980: 184).

Members of ethnic minorities do not necessarily become isolated from the rest of the group when they achieve socio-economic status in the larger society; they may instead become leaders of the group. This may be more likely if the individual cannot escape identification as a minority group member. It is worth noting that here the function of the status group is to be understood and dealt with as barriers to those minority members even after their socio-economic achievement. Social closure, exercised by a status group has its effects in the economic and the political spheres as well as the social sphere. According to Parkin, "Exclusionary social closure

is thus action by a status group designed to secure for itself certain resources and advantages at the expense of other groups" (1982: 100). In other words the process of social closure is to get "rewards and privileges to a limited circle" with "legal backing" (Parkin, 1982: 100-101).

The particular characteristic to be employed in social closure, according to Weber, is arbitrary. Parkin, however, considers the power of the state: ". . . the excluded group has already at some time been defined as inferior by the state" (1982: 102). Social closure is thus viewed as an effective vehicle for a status group already in power to keep and further acquire economic and political advantages. It should be noted that the degree of social closure may vary according to the economic climate (Parkin, 1982: 99). Economic depression is often a factor behind a social exclusion aimed at an "enemy group." For example, support for the K.K.K. in the American South and Hitler's scapegoat logic are associated with fear toward the enemy group and an economically unstable situation. Using this status group approach, Kordan sees stratification as based on social closure. He refers to the dominant group's denial of minority ethnicity as the reason why ethnic elites have not formed class barriers from their fellow people. Kordan, reflecting the role of the Ukrainian intelligentsia in the Ukrainian community, explains why high socio-economic status achievers stayed as leaders of the ethnic community (1985). In rejecting the assimilationist's idea, Kordan explains why the tie between ethnic elites and their community remains:

Indeed, one would be inclined to think that there would have been considerable assimilation among the ethnic social elite as

they began to identify with their class and as class barriers distanced them from their ethnic kindred. There were two reasons why this did not occur and both necessarily served to reconfirm for this social formation the belief that their future was inextricably linked to the community. . . . First, . . . the introduction of racial ideology into society, its permeation through all social levels and its general acceptance made impossible inter-ethnic class co-operation, whether within the working class or between social elites. . . . Secondly, the opportunity to fully assimilate was denied to those who wished to rid themselves of the ethnic stigma because they immediately threatened those in the dominant group who held elite and sub-elite positions. . . . In a society where assimilation was unavailable to an ethnic elite which was socially mobile and where ethnicity was simply unacceptable, the alternative was community mobilization. Only through collective action could they assure their own social position, satisfy the need for recognition, and alter, perhaps, the status of the group (1985: 30-31).

The above analysis leads us to focus on ethnic community activities in the public sphere and collective ethnic identity after individual mobilization. Darroch points out the seemingly "contradictory" coexistence of ethnic assimilation and persistent ethnic communities in urban Canada, which supports Kordan's theoretical analysis. Darroch states:

On the one hand, the best evidence available for urban immigrant populations quite clearly indicates that rapid intergenerational assimilation to English-language usage has

taken place and is accompanied by the wide-spread loss of personal contact with ethnic networks and communities. On the other hand, there is striking visibility and apparent persistence of urban ethnic communities and institutions themselves, in terms of residential patterns, ethnic media, ethnic politics and ethnic cultural and academic activities (1981: 93).

Darroch explains the above "contradiction" by suggesting:

... the contradiction may be accounted for when it is considered to reflect two kinds (not only optional perspectives) of ethnic status processes operating simultaneously—those of individual assimilation at one level and those of ethnic organizational "closure" at another (1981: 97).

Regarding the ethnic social and political activities, Darroch suggests the positive influence of multiculturalism policy on them and the Weberian view of an ethnic group as an interest group, although he mentions likely intra-ethnic group conflicts over interests between ordinary and elite members (1981: 94,98).

Breton distinguishes the material dimension of power and the symbolic dimension of power. The material order is that of classes and the symbolic order is that of status groups. According to Breton, "a consideration of material or utilitarian aspects, while essential, will lead to a misunderstanding of the actions and reactions of the various groups and organizations in these fields if the symbolic interests and forces involved are not given adequate weight" (1984: 123). The Japanese redress movement, for example, would be better understood as search for the symbolic interests rather than material. Yet, material interests are not confined to

economic purpose only. As Juteau-Lee states:

Although the distinction between material and symbolic resources is an interesting one, material resources should not be equated with economic ones; it follows that status politics also involve a competition over other types of material resources, namely political power. . . . ethnic diversity can best be understood by examining the relationship between ethnicity and politics (1984: 198, 199).

Conclusion

Generally, studies finding a negative relationship between socio-economic status and ethnic identity have focused on the traditional immigrant culture and way of life, while studies supporting a positive relationship have focused on the psychological and political aspects of ethnic identity. The above explains why ethnic identity and ethnic community activities remain even after cultural and behavioural assimilation of individuals to the larger society. This may be due to the reality of imperfect egalitarianism on one hand and the prevailing principles of multiculturalism on the other hand, which needs further investigation.

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3 December 1997