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stratification, race/ethnicity and

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An important research field in the stratification literature is concerned with inequalities along the ascribed characteristics of race and ethnicity. The term race connotes biological differences among people (skin color, facial features) that are transmitted from generation to generation. As such, these biological differences are seen as permanent characteristics of people. However, the notion of race does not make much sense as a biological concept, because the physical characteristics that make people distinctive are trivial. Even though biological differences are superficial, they are important sociologically. For if people believe that others are biologically distinctive, they tend to respond to them as being different. Furthermore, skin color is transmitted from generation to generation by assortative marriage, a prime sociological phenomenon.

Race is considered a social construct and in that sense incorporated in the more general notion of ethnicity. An ethnic group is a sub-population of individuals who are labeled by the majority and by the members of a group itself as being of a particular ethnicity. The term ethnicity refers to the (perceived) historical experiences of a group as well as its unique organizational, behavioral, and/or cultural characteristics. Thus, ethnic groups can be distinguished by their country of origin, religion, family practices, language, beliefs, and values. The more visible the characteristics marking ethnicity, the more likely it is that those in an ethnic category will be treated differently.

Ethnic inequality is documented in different ways. Important aspects of inequality include education (school dropout, educational attainment), the labor market (unemployment, occupational status, income), wealth, housing

quality, and health. These issues are examined at the national level, telling us something about the distribution within a population, and at the individual level, informing us about mobility. Questions on mobility include examinations of the life course of people (i.e., intragenerational) and studies comparing parents and their children (i.e., intergenerational).

The literature on ethnic stratification is divided into three different research lines. The first is concerned with the position of *indigenous populations* that were annexed through military operations and colonization, such as the American Indians in North and South America, Aborigines in Australia, and Maori in New Zealand. The second focuses on ethnic groups that are the offspring of *slaves* or *involuntary migrants*, such as African Americans in America. The third is concerned with the economic position of *voluntary migrants* and their offspring, such as the Italians who moved to the US at the turn of the twentieth century.

Research on indigenous populations has focused on native Indians in the US. The levels of education attained by Native Americans are below those attained by white Americans. Native Americans are under-represented in white-collar occupations and over-represented in service occupations. For example, in 1990 almost 42 percent of Native Americans were employed in white-collar occupations compared with 61 percent of white Americans. Native Americans tend to have lower-quality housing and lower incomes than whites. Over the last decade the incomes of Native Americans have risen somewhat.

A considerable amount of research on the position of involuntary migrants has focused on the economic position of African Americans in the US. The general assessment is that inequalities between whites and blacks are declining, but still persist long after slavery was abolished. For instance, in 1960, 20 percent of blacks attained a high school degree, compared to 43 percent among whites. In 2000, the figures were 79 percent and 88 percent, respectively. In 1960, 55 percent of blacks were living in poverty; in 2000 this was 23 percent. The black family median income as a percentage of white median income increased from 0.54 in 1950 to 0.68 in 2000.

Research on voluntary migrants has focused on the economic mobility within and between

immigrant generations. Chiswick (1978) argued and indeed found that after a certain time, immigrants of the first generation catch up economically with natives in the US. Borjas (1987), however, showed that the assimilation effect was largely due to lowering quality of (un)observed human capital in immigration cohorts. The intragenerational mobility of immigrants still attracts ample research, and the issue of assimilation remains highly debated. Evidence of economic mobility is more convincing with respect to intergenerational comparisons.

Several studies have compared the economic standing of voluntary migrants, involuntary migrants, and indigenous populations simultaneously. One classical study is by Van den Berghe (1967). He found that hierarchies of ethnic stratification are quite similar in Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and the US. In all countries, those at the top of the ethnic hierarchy are of European ancestry. These are the offspring of voluntary migrants from Portugal (Brazil), Spain (Mexico), Great Britain and the Netherlands (South Africa), and Great Britain (US). At the bottom of the hierarchy are blacks, who either formed the indigenous population (South Africa) or who were imported as slaves (Brazil, Mexico, US). In the countries of North and South America, native Indians fall in between these two groups. A more contemporary study that compares African Americans and white immigrants can be found in Lieberson (1980).

Different explanations of ethnic inequality have been proposed. Some theories have been applied exclusively to one of the three research fields (voluntary migrants, involuntary migrants, indigenous populations), whereas other ideas have been applied to two or all of them.

The idea of assimilation was proposed by Park and Burgess (1969), worked out later by Warner and Srole (1945) and Gordon (1964), and more recently by Alba and Nee (2003). Although the idea has many variants, the core assumption is that over time ethnic groups will gradually integrate into mainstream society. Thus, it was expected that both within and across generations immigrants and ethnic groups will experience upward mobility to the point that their economic position equals that of the native majority.

Chiswick (1978) provided a human capital explanation for the assimilation idea. The

human capital theory states that people's life chances depend on their human capital, and that people are aware of this relationship and rationally invest in their own human capital. Chiswick argued that immigrants have a weaker economic position at arrival than natives because immigrants have less human capital: they have less command of the host language, fewer occupational experiences, and less knowledge of the host labor market. Because immigrants invest in post-school training, gradually learn the host language, and acquire knowledge of the host labor market, they improve their position over time. And because the offspring of immigrants obtain their schooling in the host country and have perfect language skills, their position will outperform that of their parents. In this way, the human capital theory explains why ethnic groups will gradually reach economic parity with natives.

One empirical challenge for the assimilation theory and the human capital interpretation is the observation that economic incorporation differs between groups. Why do some immigrant groups rapidly integrate economically, whereas other ethnic groups, such as African Americans, remain economically at a disadvantage? Borjas (1987) and other researchers have tried to explain these issues with an extended human capital framework, incorporating notions of selective migration and the influence of (unobserved) skills, talents, and motivation. Alternatively, researchers have proposed a number of other theories to explain differences between ethnic groups. These are notions of inheritance, cultural values, discrimination, spatial mismatch, and ethnic capital.

One of the oldest explanations of ethnic group differences is the idea that groups have different biological endowments, which are genetically transmitted from generation to generation. Such biological explanations flourished in the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, providing "scientific" evidence of the biological inferiority of non-Anglo Saxon groups and justifying their subordinate status. The evidence is typically drawn from studies that compare intelligence test performances of ethnic groups and the native population. One recent example is Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994), in which they claim that African Americans and Latinos are less

intelligent than whites and for that reason have a lower economic standing. As with other studies that are informed by notions of inheritance, their study was heavily criticized by psychologists and sociologists on theoretical, methodological, and empirical grounds. For instance, contrary to the statement of Herrnstein and Murray that the race–intelligence link is stable over time, researchers showed that intelligence test scores of blacks and numerous ethnic groups improved dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. Overall, most researchers nowadays conclude that inheritance is unable to explain ethnic stratification.

Another, more sociological explanation of group differences in ethnic stratification is concerned with cultural values. Echoing the Weberian notion of the Protestant work ethic, Sowell argues in *Markets and Minorities* (1981) that Asians are model minorities at school and in the labor market because of their cultural traits of effort, thrift, dependability, and foresight. By contrast, the disadvantaged socioeconomic positions of African Americans, Latino Americans, and American Indians today are portrayed as a consequence of their cultural characteristics, which are perceived to be incompatible with a modern industrial society. The cultural approach of Sowell was criticized by several researchers, most notably Steinberg in *The Ethnic Myth* (2001).

Another cultural explanation of ethnic group differences is the hypothesis of “oppositional culture,” which argues that black youth develop an oppositional identity relative to whites because they focus on their parents’ past experiences of discrimination. As a consequence, blacks distrust the dominant society and develop distinct cultural norms in which they reject schooling as a route to socioeconomic mobility.

Many researchers use notions of discrimination to explain group differences in ethnic stratification. Two different types of ethnic discrimination (i.e., the unequal treatment of minority groups) are outlined: attitudinal and institutional. Attitudinal discrimination refers to discriminatory practices influenced by prejudice. Research shows that prejudice, and, in turn, discrimination, tends to increase when ethnic groups are perceived as threatening to the majority population in terms of cultural, economic, or political resources. Ethnic groups

that are numerically large and that are distinct culturally are especially vulnerable to discrimination. This led to theories about ethnic competition and split labor markets. Another important theory is that of statistical discrimination.

Institutional discrimination refers to rules, policies, practices, and laws that discriminate against ethnic groups. This type of discrimination is used to explain the economic difficulties that African slaves and their offspring experienced in the US. For instance, through the first half of the twentieth century, they were formally excluded from acquiring or inheriting property, marrying whites, voting, testifying against whites in court, and attending higher-quality schools. Contemporary evidence on institutional discrimination is provided by Massey and Denton (1993).

Researchers have argued that group differences in ethnic inequality can be explained by the residential concentration of ethnic groups and regional variations in economic opportunities. One influential idea states that the economic opportunities of blacks are hampered because they live in inner-cities. In *The Declining Significance of Race* (1981) and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), Wilson maintained that the economic position of the black inner-city poor has deteriorated because of structural economic changes, including change from goods-producing to service-producing industries, increased industrial technology, and the flight of industries from central cities. The process of deindustrialization has created an economic mismatch between the available jobs and the qualifications of inner-city residents, predominantly blacks. As a result, the economic position of the African American urban poor is diminishing.

Another argument stresses the role of social or “ethnic” capital, that is the resources that are available to a person through their relations with others. A highly debated issue in this respect is whether “ethnic enclaves,” in which ethnic capital is shared, promote the economic incorporation of ethnic groups. Authors have argued that more sizable and geographically concentrated ethnic groups develop an independent, mono-ethnic labor market in which their members can obtain positions otherwise held by the native majority. In ethnic economies the returns to human capital are expected to be higher than outside the ethnic economy.

Various research designs have been used to study ethnic stratification. The classical design is the case study, in which a single ethnic group in a single receiving context is examined. Because this design provides little information on contextual effects, comparative macro designs have also been developed. One such popular framework is the “comparative origin” method, which compares multiple ethnic groups in a single location, yielding important insights into ethnic group differences. Similarly, researchers have paid attention to the role of the receiving context by comparing a single ethnic group across multiple destinations, such as cities or nations (“comparative destination” design). More recently, these macro approaches have been combined into a “double comparative” design, which studies multiple-origin groups in multiple destinations simultaneously. This design provides a better understanding of ethnic origin, the receiving context, and the specific interaction between origin and destination (“ethnic community”).

Another methodological development in the literature is to rely on dynamic designs. Initially, researchers compared the position of ethnic groups at a single point in time (e.g., by relying on a single cross-sectional survey). By pooling cross-sectional surveys that are apart in time, researchers were able to disentangle assimilation effects from cohort effects (“synthetic cohort design”). Dynamic designs have been improved further by the appearance of panel surveys on immigrants.

In general, three different measures of ethnicity are used: country of origin, nationality, and ethnic self-identification or subjective ancestry. Country of origin and nationality are often used to study *voluntary* migrants. A drawback of using nationality as a measure of ethnicity is that voluntary migrants who are successful in the labor market are more likely to naturalize, leading studies on nonnaturalized migrants to underestimate their economic performance. For that reason, researchers generally prefer the country of origin of the respondent, the parents, and the grandparents.

Research on *involuntary* migrants and *indigenous* populations generally relies on ethnic self-identification and subjective ancestry. These measures are problematic for several reasons. First, like nationality, ethnic self-identification

is partly an outcome of people’s economic position, leading the more successful people not to identify with their lower-status ethnic background. Second, ethnic and racial boundaries and self-identified characterizations change over time. For instance, previously “non-white” ethnic groups such as Irish and Italians became “white,” often by deliberately distinguishing themselves from blacks. Third, subjective measures of ethnicity assume a single identification, whereas, through intermarriage, a considerable proportion of the population has multiple identifications.

In many countries, general population surveys or specific immigration surveys contain questions on country of origin or nationality, providing a wealth of data for studies on *voluntary* migrants. Large-scale surveys rarely contain subjective measures of ethnicity, leading to fewer data sources available for the study of *involuntary* migrants and *indigenous* populations. An exception is the census of the US. As an alternative, several researchers have conducted small-scale or qualitative studies to examine these populations.

Researchers nowadays agree that ethnicity plays a role in people’s life chances, that ethnic groups gradually improve their economic standing across generations, and that the process of assimilation can be interpreted in terms of human capital accumulation. At the same time, it is found that assimilation rates of ethnic groups vary. Initially, researchers have relied on theories of biological traits and cultural dispositions to explain such group differences, but they have been largely replaced by extensions of the human capital theory, ideas on discrimination, the concept of ethnic capital, and spatial differences in economic opportunities. In recent work, researchers have combined the theories explaining group differences with micro-level approaches explaining individual assimilation.

Methodologically, as more large-scale data become available, researchers increasingly prefer to use comparative research methods rather than the case study. Much of the classical and contemporary work on ethnic stratification has been done in the US, but research in other countries is rapidly growing. This opens the possibility of comparing patterns of ethnic stratification cross-nationally, possibly also including ethnic groups in developing countries.

Another important direction of future research is the development and application of dynamic research designs to study ethnic mobility.

SEE ALSO: Assimilation; Ethnic Enclaves; Ethnic and Racial Division of Labor; Ethnicity; Race; Race (Racism); Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis; Stratification, Gender and; Stratification and Inequality, Theories of

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stratification systems: openness

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All societies are stratified, but some more so than others. Perhaps the most visible variable feature of a society's stratification system is the difference in the standard of living of its

inhabitants at a particular point in time. Nowadays, most advanced industrial societies regularly publish statistics on yearly household income, such as the share of all incomes going to the top 20 and bottom 20 percent of all households. Statistics on the causes of income differences are published on a regular basis too, such as figures on inequalities in household wealth, the relation between wealth and income, and the returns to education in terms of income.

For sociologists, these measures fail to capture an important aspect of a society's stratification system: the degree to which it is open or closed. If households are made up of dual-earner couples and the two partners have different incomes, this equalizes the income shares of quintile groups. To the extent that such marriages occur, a stratification system may be said to be open. But what if the individual income shares of quintiles do not change over time? Stability at the societal level does not imply that incomes of individuals remain the same: there may have been an exchange of persons between quintiles. That is why individual or household mobility, along a criterion like income, is also an important aspect of societal openness for sociologists.

Of the classical sociologists, Max Weber most clearly conceived of societal stratification as a process comprising less advanced and more advanced stages of closure. In a society consisting of strata that can be ranked according to some principle from higher to lower, those within a stratum may combine so as to limit the number of newly entering persons, in tacit or explicit cooperation with state authorities and employers. This happened in some countries during the second half of the twentieth century with respect to occupations such as general practice and printing. Medieval guilds also limited the number of new entries and strengthened exclusion by granting sons the right to succeed their fathers. A stratification system is even more closed if the members of two different societal strata do not intermarry. In Europe, the marriage of a member of the nobility with someone from another estate was at least a *mésalliance*. Weber pointed out that the Southern states of the United States forbade marriages between whites and blacks by law around 1900. The sanction against marriages between members of different classes went further in Hindu