

MARGINALITY OF AMERICAN JEWISH MEDICAL STUDENTS IN A MEXICAN UNIVERSITY

Erwin H. Epstein and Catherine A. Riordan

Interaction between groups often takes place under conditions of dominance and subordination. Indeed, the terms "ethnic group" and "minority group" — denoting victims of subordination — are frequently interchanged. In most plural societies, dominant groups enjoy the advantage of disproportionate control over the knowledge of rules, roles and relationships that govern social intercourse. Lyman and Douglas (1973:352) observe that ethnic groups are forced to tacitly acknowledge the rules of the game set by the dominant group and tend to resent their relative lack of power. Ethnic-group frustration is also encouraged by the dominant group's tendency to stereotype. That tendency is symptomatic of the dominant group's ignorance of the cultural roles and practices of subordinate groups; the former makes the rules for the society as a whole and therefore does not feel compelled to have detailed knowledge of the groups under its control. Stereotyping tends to erode further the position of ethnic groups, which express resistance by devising manipulative strategies to protect themselves and by promoting a collective consciousness. In the process of gaining a perception of themselves as having common qualities, ethnic group members acquire a social identity that becomes part of their self image (Rothman, 1960; Zander, Stotland and Wolfe, 1960; Rinder, 1969; Teske and Nelson, 1973; Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1974; Caditz, 1976).

The survival strategies used by ethnic groups have been widely studied. Most of this research has focused on traditional groups; the study of inchoate groups, which could tell us more about the etiology of ethnicity, has been largely ignored. Traditional groups can inform us about behavior required for perpetuation but not so much about formative behavior. Under what conditions do people aggregate initially into an ethnic group and, as the group is being formed, how does it relate to the dominant society? Unfortunately, the opportunity to observe ethnicity being created is rare, because defining characteristics — dress, foods, language, religion, phenotype, etc. — tend to evolve over long periods of time, as do dominant-subordinate relationships. Only when individuals are thrust abruptly into a new environment where those controlling the rules of the game are of different cultures, would conditions seem appropriate for initiating ethnicity. Such an environment exists in the medical school of the Universidad de Monterrey in Mexico, where North Americans, Latin Americans and Mexicans constitute distinct student groups.

Elsewhere we have reported that the American students in this school displayed more intense ethnocentrism than their Mexican and Latin American peers (Epstein and Riordan, 1986). We explain these findings by alluding to the disproportionately greater pressure on the Americans to succeed, pressure generated by the severe competition they experience as students in a foreign institution. For one thing, the tuition charged American students and the overall expense of gaining an education in Mexico are considerably higher for them than for Mexicans and Latin Americans. The most costly investment for them, however, is social. Most Americans enter Mexico with little or no command of Spanish and no grasp of Mexican culture. To survive, they must learn the language at a professionally acceptable level and familiarize themselves with the rules of a game over which they have no control. They are, in other words, a minority group competing at a disadvantage with others who labor under no linguistic or cultural handicaps, and against a future standard set by their compatriots at North American institutions. They suffer, therefore, the dual disadvantage of having to compete with culturally favored Mexican and Latin American students on the one hand and their professionally favored peers in the U.S. on the other.

Our use of heightened competitive pressure to explain differential ethnocentrism among UDEM medical students is consistent with earlier research showing that competitiveness combined with inter-ethnic contact, and not contact alone, gives rise to ethnocentric feelings (Cook, 1969; Cohen, 1973). Yet within the group of American students, Jews in particular may experience more competitive pressure and therefore heightened ethnocentrism. Sociologists, after all, have characterized Jews as the quintessentially marginal group, as people with multiple historical traditions, languages, political loyalties and moral codes, who are therefore likely to find themselves on the margin of each. Stonequist (1937), who used Jews as subjects for many of his case histories, defines the "marginal man" as one who is

...poised in psychological uncertainty between two (or more) social worlds; reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds, one of which is often "dominant" over the other; within which membership is implicitly if not explicitly based upon birth or ancestry (race or nationality); and where exclusion removes the individual from a system of group relations.

As such, marginal individuals are reported to have attitudes of insecurity, ambivalence, excessive self-consciousness and chronic nervous strain. For them, competition may represent a form of sublimation or a means to gain social acceptance. Thus, to the extent that American students as a group in

Mexico suffer marginality, that experience may be even more intense for the Jews among them.

Ethnocentrism and Sense of Nationality Among Jewish Medical Students Procedure

We are concerned here with how ethnocentrism and feelings of nationality might be influenced by conditions of marginality. In a previous study, we found that American students displayed disproportionately higher ethnocentrism, and attributed that condition to their more intense competitiveness. In the present study, we hypothesized that greater marginality among Jewish students would produce elevated ethnocentrism compared even to the high ethnocentric level of the other Americans.

Subjects were medical students enrolled at the Universidad de Monterrey, Mexico during the Spring semester of 1980. All students in the medical school attended a special session during which they were asked to complete a questionnaire. Data were collected from 316 students, 306 of whom provided complete responses to the ethnocentrism scale which were used in these analyses. 57 percent of the students identified their nationality as Mexican, 25 percent as United States, and 17 percent as Latin American (outside Mexico). Of the American (U.S.) students ($n=71$), 20 percent ($n=14$) indicated their religion as "Jewish". Three Jewish students were not from the U.S. Virtually all of the American students had been denied admission to medical schools in the U.S.

Students were asked several questions about their feelings of nationality. In addition, a 30-item scale was used to measure ethnocentric beliefs regarding Mexico and the United States. For each item, subjects were asked to express the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a statement, written in Spanish, about the relative value of Mexico or the United States, such as "Mexican traditions are better than those of North Americans," "North Americans are more concerned about humanity than are Mexicans," "Mexicans are kinder than North Americans," and "North Americans have a loftier sense of justice than Mexicans". Responses were based on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Items were keyed such that the most pro-United States attitudes received higher values; and total scores were obtained by summing all items weighted equally. Technically, scores could range from 30 to 130. A score of 90 would reflect approximately equal numbers of pro-Mexican and pro-United States attitudes. Finally, data were collected on students' background characteristics, including age, father's education and occupation, and languages spoken.

Results

The mean and median total score on the ethnocentric scale was 89 across all subjects in the study, including the Mexican and Latin American student groups. The Jewish students' mean score on this scale was 102, which was somewhat higher, but not significantly different, than the score for the non-Jewish American group [$m=98$, $t(69)=1.16$, $p<.25$].

The Jewish Students' feelings of nationality differed somewhat from their non-Jewish compatriots. When asked to identify the national holidays most important to them, a somewhat higher percentage of the Jewish students (91 percent) than non-Jewish students (82 percent) chose all U.S. holidays. More striking were differences of identity with political heroes: 83 percent of the Jews, but only 57 percent of the non-Jews, identified an American as their most important political hero. Unfortunately, in view of the small number of Jewish students, tests of significance for these differences were not feasible.

Discussion

In keeping with our hypothesis, our findings showed that Jewish American medical students at the Universidad de Monterrey in Mexico tended to be somewhat more ethnocentric and have stronger feelings of U.S. nationality than their non-Jewish compatriots at that university. These results, however, should be viewed as tentative. The differences for ethnocentrism were not statistically significant, and significance tests on the items on sense of nationality were not feasible.

Even if our findings are to be considered reliable, the greater marginality of Jewish students may not be the only factor accounting for the results. For example, 10 percent of the non-Jewish students but none of the Jewish students permanently reside outside of the U.S. Thus, the greater continuing exposure to Latin Americans could have had a favorable influence, diminishing ethnocentric feelings in the overall non-Jewish American group. Moreover, background factors could have had a binding influence on ethnocentric scores and feelings of nationality. Although 79 percent of Jewish students' fathers had obtained a university degree, only 55 percent of the non-Jewish American fathers had done so. Similarly, among the fathers of Jewish students 71 percent were professionals or had equivalent-status occupations as opposed to 38 percent among the fathers of non-Jewish students. Clearly, further research is necessary before definitive inferences about the relationship between marginality and ethnocentric attitudes can be drawn.

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