Ethnicity and Causal Mechanisms

Research clearly indicates that ethnic groups differ significantly on levels of mental and physical health, antisocial behavior, and educational attainment. This book explains these variations among ethnic groups with respect to their psychological and social functioning and tests competing hypotheses about the mechanisms that might cause the functioning to be better, worse, or different in pattern from other groups. Attention is paid to educational attainments, antisocial behavior, schizophrenia, and suicide, and to the complex and changing patterns of ethnic identity. The book also focuses on evidence of risk and protective factors that is used systematically to ask whether such factors might account for the differences in both migration histories and ethnic mixture. It concludes with a discussion of the multiple meanings of ethnicity, the major variations among ethnic groups, and the policy implications of the findings discussed in the book.

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Foreword

Christian Jacobs, Chairman
Jacobs Foundation

Over the years, ethnic minority groups have often been viewed by both the media and the general population as "problems." For some this has been because they have been viewed as representing social disadvantage, and for others because they have been seen as genetically inferior. Currently, many countries are in the midst of intense political debate about the supposed way in which immigrant groups are undermining the host culture and asylum seekers are constituting a burden on the state. The Jacobs Foundation has been concerned with the reality that some ethnic minority groups do indeed experience difficulties and, equally, with the fact that the prevailing stereotypes are usually misleading in several rather different ways. Accordingly, we were very pleased to initiate and sponsor the international, interdisciplinary conference that provided the basis for this edited volume.

The Foundation was keen that both the conference and the book would provide an incisive, insightful new look at ethnicity, and the contributors to this book have done this in admirable fashion. Three main themes constitute the basis for this truly fresh approach to ethnicity. First, there is discussion of the many facets of ethnicity. It is not an objective "thing." Rather it is a complex amalgam of cultural traditions, religion, geography, skin color, facial appearance, self-identification, host labeling, political decisions and genetic background. Each of these facets may be crucially important in different circumstances, but often they pull in different directions. Moreover, some of the facets are dimensional and some are categorical. Furthermore, research has shown that it is common for people to have more than one ethnic identification. Any meaningful consideration of ethnicity has to take this complexity into account.

Second, research findings, as well as experiences, emphasize that ethnic groups are far from homogeneous. Some tend, on average, to be unusually disadvantaged, but also some are advantaged relative to the total population of which they form a part. In addition, all groups are very

heterogeneous within themselves. In most circumstances, the variation within ethnic groups is as great, or greater, than that between groups.

Third, there is the most distinctive feature of this volume which differentiates it from all others examining ethnicity. That is, these variations within and among groups, with respect to a range of psychological features, are used to test competing hypotheses about possible mediating causal mechanisms. It is evident that this important research approach has already led to a better understanding of some key issues. It is also clear, however, that much more needs to be done if we are to have a firm knowledge about causal processes. Each of the chapters seeks to provide some look ahead to the challenges remaining to be met.

Finally, in keeping with the Jacobs Foundation commitment to the need to make research inform policy and practice, the last chapter seeks to draw the threads together, insofar as that is possible, to conclude what remains to be done. The result is not the simple, universally applicable solution that some politicians look for, but it does constitute a thoughtfully constructive discussion of priorities.

All too often, discussions about ethnicity are. All too often, discussions about ethnicity are viewed as too complex to be productive because they are so prone to degenerate into expressions of prejudice and stereotype. The Jacobs Foundation prides itself on its willingness to take on controversial areas so long as it is convinced that to do so will be useful for policy and practice and that the discussions can be undertaken in a fair, well-informed, and balanced manner. In our view, this volume well illustrates both the need to take on politically tricky topics and the fact that this can be done in an honest and transparent fashion.

Preface

Ethnic groups differ on a wide range of features – spanning health, education, mental disorder, and crime, to mention but a few. These differences have given rise to a substantial literature on supposed cultural influences. In recent years, interest in cultural differences has been associated with a major paradigm shift from cross-cultural to within-culture studies (Shweder et al., 1998). For the most part, this shift reflects a concern that the concepts and measures derived in any one culture cannot be assumed to cover the universe of features that operate in other cultures. We share that concern and accept the value of qualitative, in-depth studies of a single culture.

However, the aim of this book is not to understand how any one particular culture functions. Because ethnic groups differ appreciably with respect to both their own characteristics and the patterns of psychological and social functioning with which they are associated, we sought to use variations across ethnic groups as a means of examining and, where possible, testing competing hypotheses about the mediating causal mechanisms. Accordingly, to somewhat oversimplify, the research strategy involves determining which risk or protective factors are significantly associated with particular psychosocial outcomes *within* each ethnic group. We reasoned that if specific factors mediate an observed *between-group* difference, then the prevalence of the risk/protective factor will differ between the ethnic groups; moreover, when the factor is introduced into a multivariate analysis, it will obliterate (or, at least, bring about a major reduction in) the difference between groups.

Because this analytic approach involves both within-group and between-group differences, the identification of the mediating mechanism for the one should throw light on the other. Moreover, the approach considers both good functioning and impairment; hence it makes no assumption that any one group sets the "norm." Also, by making comparisons across several ethnic groups, rather than merely between the majority group in

any one country and some selected minority group, the generalizability of inferences is enhanced.

Rutter's opening chapter sets the scene by discussing some of the conceptual, research strategy, and methodological issues involved in using "natural experiments" of this kind to test causal hypotheses. Examples from a range of topics are used to illustrate the approach, with particular attention being paid to migration designs because of their power to "pull apart" different aspects of ethnicity.

We could have chosen to examine the effects of ethnicity across many different countries, but this would have compounded difficulties in interpretation because the patterns of ethnic differences are highly variable across nations, and because many countries lack appropriate statistics to implement our strategy. Accordingly, we chose to focus, for the most part, on just two countries – the United States and the United Kingdom. They have an interesting, and potentially informative, mix of similarities and differences that help in testing causal hypotheses. In the second chapter, Tienda pulls together the evidence on the social and demographic indicators across ethnic groups in the two countries and, drawing on a broader research literature, considers the possible implications of selected differences and similarities.

Because consideration of ethnicity is necessarily shaped by people's concepts of what it means, in the third chapter we discuss the diverse meanings that have been ascribed to ethnicity and the analytical challenges posed for identifying causal mechanisms. At one and the same time, it is a personal construct that gives rise to a self-description, it is a social construction imposed by society, it is a legal category, and it reflects genetically determined racial differences. Each of these constructs involves multiple contrasting facets. That many people consider themselves as belonging to several different groups, defined in different ways, further complicates the study and understanding of ethnicity.

The next two chapters constitute a pair in which Maughan considers ethnic differences in educational attainments in the United Kingdom, and Hirschman and Lee do the same for the United States, albeit using rather different kinds of data. Maughan notes the large differences among ethnic groups, with attainments highest for African Asians and Indians (also Chinese, but the sample size was small), intermediate for Pakistanis and Whites, somewhat lower for Black Caribbeans, and lowest of all in Bangladeshis. All ethnic groups showed educational gains in relation to their immigrant parents, but these were greatest for African Asians and least for Bangladeshis. Black Caribbeans experienced the highest rate of exclusion from school, and also the highest level of teacher–child conflict. Black Africans also exhibited a moderately high rate of exclusion from school, but the rate for Bangladeshis was very low. Although the rate

of single-parent households was exceptionally high among the children of Caribbean immigrants, and although White children in single-parent households tended to have lower scholastic attainments, this was not so for children of Caribbean origin. Maughan explains that whereas White single mothers tended to be poorly qualified, single Caribbean mothers were better qualified than their married counterparts. On the basis of the frequency of racial harassment of both Blacks and Asians, one might suppose that this would have impeded the educational performance of both groups, but the educational performance of the Indians was generally higher than that of Whites. The findings to date do not allow any ready inferences on mediating mechanisms; indeed they present some apparent paradoxes that provide fertile ground for future research.

In their discussion of findings for the United States, Hirschman and Lee mainly focus on the transition from high school to college, making major use of their own study of college plans among high school students in a metropolitan school district in the Pacific Northwest. Asian Americans are the group most likely to attend college – a rate of about 80 percent compared with the mid-1960s for Whites, with lower rates for other ethnic groups. As in the United Kingdom, over time, college attendance rates rose for all ethnic groups. Hirschman and Lee show a similar pattern for college plans. The proportion of East Asians who intended to attend college was particularly high, whereas relatively few Hispanics had college plans and Whites were intermediate between these extremes. In many ways, the most striking finding (as in the United Kingdom) is that family structure predicted the educational ambitions of Whites and Asians, but it did not do so for Blacks. Parental education was also a more significant predictor of college intentions for Whites than for Black and Asian students. Interestingly, too, insofar as parental schooling influenced college plans, maternal rather than paternal education appeared more influential for Black students, whereas the opposite applied among Asian Americans. As in the United Kingdom, although hypotheses can be proposed to account for the observed patterns, the results do not suggest clear mediating mechanisms.

The next pair of chapters (6 and 7) deals with antisocial behavior in a parallel fashion. Morenoff considers the findings in the United States and Smith does the same for the United Kingdom. In both countries, previous reviewers have drawn attention to the striking disparity between the huge ethnic differences shown in official statistics and the much smaller ethnic variation found in self-report studies. Morenoff provides a thoughtful critique of what this difference might mean – pointing out the likely effects of the groups that tend to be missed out in the self-report studies, the greater focus on minor delinquency in questionnaires, and the evidence of some ethnic bias in self-reports (as shown by reverse record checks). He notes that methodological improvements should help to make future

self-reports more valid. Subsequently, Morenoff systematically considers possible mediators of the ethnic differences in crime. He notes that although IQ has a robust association with crime in all ethnic groups, its meaning appears to differ among groups. For Blacks, but not Whites, the effect of IQ on crime is almost entirely attributable to school achievement. Both African Americans and Hispanics tend to be socially disadvantaged in comparison with Whites, but this seems an unlikely key mediator of the IQ–crime association because crime rates are high for African Americans but not for Hispanics. The socioeconomic context of the neighborhood is more strongly associated with the crime rate of Whites compared with Blacks. Morenoff suggests that this may be due to a ceiling effect because of the much greater deprivation experienced by African Americans compared with any other US ethnic group. Finally, Morenoff presents important new findings from the Chicago Neighborhoods Study. Crime rates (as self-reported) were highest, especially for high-frequency violent crime, among African Americans and lowest among Mexican Americans. Multivariate analyses showed that neighborhood disadvantage was the single most important mediator of the violent crime difference between African Americans and Whites; neither family structure nor SES was influential. The low rate of violent crime among Mexican Americans was traced to a combination of factors, including living with married parents and in a neighborhood with a high concentration of immigrants, as well as foreign birth. The different findings for African Americans and Mexican Americans suggest that neighborhoods can provide either risk or protection. Evidence that crime rates seem to be rising among third-generation immigrant Mexican Americans cautions against inferences that protective factors maintain their influence over generations.

Smith's analysis of UK crime data provides many parallels, but also several differences. He notes the lack of a consistent association between ethnic patterns of social disadvantage and ethnic patterns of crime rates. Offending rates tend to be low among both Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, who are among the most deprived ethnic groups. However, Indians and African Asians, who are among the least deprived ethnics, also exhibit low crime rates. Crime is particularly high among African Caribbeans, who are intermediate in social circumstances. Much the same applies with respect to educational achievement. Racial discrimination against both African Caribbeans and subcontinental Asians is high, yet the crime rate of the former is high while that of the latter is low. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are the most geographically concentrated of the ethnic groups, and African Caribbeans the least so. Smith suggests that such concentration, depending on what goes with it, could constitute either a risk or a protective factor. He notes the very high rate of single parenthood among African-Caribbean families, but also the lack of data on whether it constitutes a risk factor for this group to the degree that it does for Whites.

Deater-Deckard et al., in Chapter 8, focus on the finding that physical punishment is a risk factor for antisocial behavior among European Americans, but not for African Americans. Yet, physical abuse is a risk factor for both groups. They present further research findings that seek to test competing hypotheses about the meaning of these findings, with results that are somewhat inconclusive. Children's attitudes toward punishment moderated the physical punishment effect among European Americans, but not African Americans. It may be that the risk effect derives not from the physical punishment as such, but from the uncontrolled anger that sometimes accompanies it; moreover, the extent to which this is the case varies by ethnicity. The finding of ethnic difference highlights the importance of always probing the meaning of variables, and differentiating between risk indicators and risk mechanisms.

In Chapter 9, which deals with schizophrenia, Jones and Fung present the findings of a systematic, well-designed study that investigates why the rate of schizophrenia is so much higher among African Caribbeans living in the United Kingdom than in either African Caribbeans living in the Caribbean or Whites living in the United Kingdom. On the one hand, they show that the ethnic difference is not an artifact of diagnostic practice or referral pattern, and that it similarly obtains in the Netherlands. On the other hand, the elevated rate is not confined to schizophrenia because, to a lesser degree, it also applies to mania. Interestingly, however, there is no differential in minor psychiatric morbidity. The differential is also not entirely restricted to African Caribbeans because it applies to some other ethnic minorities to a lesser degree, but not to Turks. The findings to date suggest that the higher rates of psychoses among African Caribbeans are not due to differential migration or to early brain injury; they also appear not to be attributable to the use of cannabis. Rather, the strong inference is that there is something psychotogenic about living in the United Kingdom for African Caribbeans, but the remaining challenge is to determine just what is involved.

In Chapter 10, Gibbs discusses the curious paradox of the finding that, despite their greater exposure to psychosocial adversities, both Black and Hispanic youth in the United States have rates of suicide that are lower than that of their more advantaged White counterparts. Interestingly, however, the patterns in Blacks and Hispanics differ. The findings for Blacks indicate that their rates of depressive disorder and of suicidal ideation, as well as their rate of suicide, are low in comparison with Whites. The main issue, therefore, is why all of these rates are relatively low. The situation with Hispanics is different in that their rates of depression and of suicidal ideation are *not* low, despite their low rate of suicide. Accordingly, the query is why their relatively high rate of depression does not result in a correspondingly high rate of suicide. Gibbs's review of risk and protective factors that might be relevant to ethnic variations in suicide

raises more questions than it answers, but it shows that the questions could be tackled by appropriate research, and that such research should be undertaken.

The next pair of chapters (11 and 12) concerns aspects of ethnic identity; Modood discusses the UK situation and Rumbaut that in the US. Modood bases his account primarily on the large-scale study undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute. He notes that for South Asians, religion constituted the most important identifier of group, and "Blackness" was most important for about one third to one half of African Caribbeans, but scarcely so for any South Asians. There were marked differences among ethnic groups in rates of intermarriage, which were very high for African Caribbeans, but very low among Bangladeshis. Linguistic community was important for some, as was country of origin; however, ethnic minorities were more likely to identify with being English than with being British. Jobs also provided a source of identity for some people. Multiple ethnic identities were the rule rather than the exception, even if one identity was particularly salient. Modood notes that African Caribbeans have a leading-edge presence in youth culture. Possibly as a result, African-Caribbean ethnicity has brought considerable social dividends despite the rather limited economic benefits, but the pattern for Indians is precisely the reverse. He comments that prejudice against Asians is particularly high at present – probably as a result of the public association of Muslims with suicide bombers (although most Muslims do not support terrorists).

Rumbaut, in discussing the situation in the United States, primarily relies on findings from the Children of Immigrants Study undertaken in Southern California and South Florida. Based on a survey of youth at 14 to 15 years of age, with a follow-up interview at 17 to 18 years, he documents the extent to which self-reported ethnic identities remained constant over time. Nearly half maintained the same identity, but more than half shifted, the changes going in several different directions. Although society tends to expect one ethnic label (such as Hispanic or Asian) to subsume all facets of identity, youth were quite plural in their ethnic self-identifications. Their individual choices were shaped by a range of factors spanning personal experiences of discrimination, family influences, and the societal context. In addition, there are some striking intergenerational differences. For example, apart from the Mexicans, most parents who came to the United States from Latin America identified their race as "White," whereas their children were more likely to opt for "Hispanic" or "Latino." Rumbaut emphasizes the need to view ethnicity as a fluid, multifaceted concept.

In the final chapter, we seek to draw the threads together and to note policy implications. It is concluded that ethnicity is not a homogeneous concept; it is multifaceted rather than unidimensional, it is quantitative

rather than qualitative, and it tends to be viewed differently by the various ethnic groups. Because of these features, ethnicity as such cannot be considered to be a mediator for any group difference in social, emotional, or behavioral functioning. On the other hand, some aspect of ethnicity must mediate the ethnic differences in these features, and the challenge is to identify which the mediators are likely to be. The answer is likely to be very informative as to the causal processes involved in producing differentiation more generally, and not solely ethnic variations.

Because many ethnic minorities suffer social disadvantage, some writers have tended to imply that the two are synonymous. Clearly, they are not. Ethnic groups compared in the foregoing chapters differ appreciably in their educational performance, some outperforming Whites and some lagging behind in scholastic achievement. Huge heterogeneity within all ethnic groups renders stereotypical images of the "typical" African American or Asian analytically useless and substantively meaningless. Societal influences are clearly operative with respect to both racial discrimination and housing policy, but discrimination as such may play less of a role in individual functioning than ordinarily supposed. Ethnic concentration in communities will have different consequences according to whether it brings social cohesion and mutual support, or social disorganization.

Because the differences among ethnic groups on single parenthood are so great, it is tempting to view this aspect of family structure as a likely key mediator, but there are indications that it may not be so. Probably researchers need to shift from a focus on family structure to a focus on family functioning. In parallel fashion, it is tempting to emphasize "cultural" influences to explain ethnic differences in psychosocial outcomes, but it is necessary not only to identify these, but also to determine their origins and the mechanisms that maintain or weaken them.

Until these matters are resolved, there are few straightforward policy implications with respect to prevention or intervention. Nevertheless, one crucial implication is the need to reject stereotyping, to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of most people's multiple ethnic identities, to appreciate the existence of intergenerational differences, and to recognize the fluidity of ethnicity. In addition, the extensive heterogeneity within ethnic groups is a powerful reminder that efforts to frame policies based on the specific needs of individual ethnic groups would most likely be misguided. Although that may occasionally be useful, prevention strategies need to be targeted on those who could profit from them, regardless of ethnicity. Thus, these should include strategies concerned with parenting, education, and employment skills and opportunities – to mention but a few examples. With respect to societal policies, the key need is to focus on inequities and inequalities brought about by social order and organization. Diversity and

individual differences are both inevitable and acceptable; it is injustice and social constraints imposed by society that should not be tolerated.

Michael Rutter and Marta Tienda

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