Ethnicity in Librarianship: A Rationale for Multiethnic Library Services in a Heterogeneous Society

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In the United States the notion that ethnicity is "in" is certainly encouraged by the multiplicity of references to it in both scholarly and popular sources of information. The struggle for recognition by racial and ethnic minorities, instigated by the black power movement in the 1960s, has catapulted into sharp focus the concept that America, far from being a "melting pot," is a country best described by such words as pluralistic, multicultural and multiethnic. "Ethnic pluralism" refers to the variety of ethnic minorities, each of which wants equality of opportunity in addition to a group identity that will be accepted by all other groups in society. It is typical of ethnic minorities that they do not have sufficient power to fulfill their needs and are constantly striving to overcome discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping.

In its simplest definition, the condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group constitutes "ethnicity." A concomitant quality is ethnic pride. As a new concept, ethnicity has been in a state of constant growth and development since Glazer and Moynihan startled us with their book Beyond the Melting Pot, which underscored the existence of ethnic enclaves in the neighborhoods of New York. Instead of homogenized, assimilated Americans, they found heterogeneous national groups identified particularly by their cultural differences and special interests.

In essence, ethnicity rejects assimilation as well as separatism and thrives on a positive, irreducible diversity. It is especially suited for the defense of minority rights, which may be impaired, however, by mani-

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festations of chauvinism and racism. The following is an appropriate statement from the spring 1975 conference of the National Education Association and the Council on Interracial Books, which was concerned about attacks on multiethnic textbooks and library materials.

Ours is a multicultural society. Our population includes U.S. citizens of European, Asian, African, Central and South American, Caribbean and Native American descent. All of these groups have contributed to the total cultural fabric of our society. Our laws, music, art, language and literature reflect the values of this diversity. Our public educative process is obligated to reflect this reality. All people have the right of access to materials that express the rich multilingual, multicultural nature of our society. Our heritage of freedom of speech and freedom of inquiry demands this. The goals of a democratic society require it.3

To understand ethnicity one must know a good deal about the physical, linguistic, cultural, and religious characteristics typical of an ethnic group. People in a society who share a historic identity and consciousness based on cultural commonality or territorial ties, or a group of the same race or national origin, speaking the same language and/or sharing a common, distinctive culture, constitute such a group.4 Common racial identity alone does not make an ethnic group; a sharing of history and cultural tradition is necessary.

Librarianship is closely related to ethnicity in that it intends to serve all the people in the community and so must find ways to reach people from all the ethnic groups in the library orbit, users and nonusers. This relationship can only be maintained on a continuing fruitful basis by means of creative collection building and innovative programs and services for these ethnic groups. In order to do this successfully as professionals, we must have a thorough understanding of and sensitivity to the factor of ethnicity in the heritage, behavior and lifestyles of the people in the local community.

What the Social Science Disciplines Tell Us About Ethnicity

In a long introduction to the second edition of Beyond the Melting Pot, Glazer and Moynihan analyze their previous findings with the hindsight of seven years of experience. Here are their key observations:

1. Ethnicity in New York remains important; it will continue to be important to the politics and culture of the city.
2. Negroes and Puerto Ricans can be seen as the latest of a series of ethnic groups (Germans and Irish, Jews and Italians) that have come as immigrants to New York with its basic cultural characteristics, particularly the family structure.
3. The prediction that religion would be a major line of division has been replaced with the observation that "ethnicity and race dominate the city, more than ever seemed possible in 1963" (p.ix).
4. Ethnicity and ethnic identity persist; in fact, ethnicity is a real basis of political and social action.
5. The enclaves mentioned above, according to more recent data, still conform to distinctive residential patterns which characterize most ethnic groups.5

The events of the 1960s and 1970s in relation to the upsurge of ethnic groups looking for recognition have drawn the attention of scholars in the social sciences. In a special issue of the International Journal of Group Tensions the attitudes and findings of different academic disciplines reveal a wide range of positions on ethnicity. The issue editor, Joseph B. Gittler of Yeshiva University, stated at the outset that ethnicity, meaning the call for group affiliation and identification "has in recent years resonated with robust pitch and wide range."6 He noted that in New York City there are seventy-five groups of varied ethnic complexes seeking recognition and confirmation. There is also the political evidence of:

1. Jews, blacks, Irish, Hispanics, who have separate organizations in the police department, as well as in other employment services;
2. bilingual school curricula, not only in Spanish, but also Chinese, French, Italian and other languages; and
3. politicians seeking, as usual, the potency of the ethnic vote, representing organized responses to prejudice and discrimination.

Reference was also made to Horace Kallen, father of the concept of cultural pluralism, who voiced the hope that the wealth of each cultural heritage would enrich the other with strength and vigor—contrary to the myth of the melting pot.7

The political scientist in this group of authors, Rita W. Cooley of New York University, declared that: "there is not a scintilla of evidence that ethnicity is declining as a major political factor in the United States. Whether one applauds or deplores this phenomenon, one thing is certain, political scientists along with other social scientists and historians will have to continue to grapple with ethnicity, in all of its elusive nuances, if they are to explicate the deepest realities of American politics."8

This clearcut statement is followed by that of the economist, Felicia Deyrup of the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research (New York City), whose position is that while economists can tell much about the treatment of minority groups in the work force, they must turn to sociology and social psychology to identify the roots of discrimination, which lie not in men's work relations but in their perceptions of one another.9
Social psychologists Bertram Cohler and Morton A. Lieberman of the University of Chicago concluded from their study of Irish, Italian and Polish groups' "life satisfaction and psychological impairment" that the ethnic affiliation of both the first and second generations was strongly associated with patterns of behavior used in achieving a successful adaptation. "Such findings suggest that we should approach evaluation of mental health among persons in particular ethnic groups with an appreciation of the particular value orientation of that group and not from the perspective of textbook ideals." What is suggested here is that professionals must get to know that value orientation which, in essence, is the synthesis of the old and new cultures reflected in a distinct ethnic personality.

Anthropologist June Macklin of Connecticut College stated that American anthropologists came rather late to the study of American ethnic minorities, primarily because of their overwhelming focus on primitive man. However, since World War II there has been some cautious and limited activity concerning the new ethnicity. Two themes have emerged thus far, namely, that there is much intragroup heterogeneity and that ethnicity is a dynamic concept which must be carefully explored in each case. We are assured that ethnicity will continue to attract the interests of anthropologists as enthusiastic participants in what looks like a burgeoning industry.

Of the two sociologists represented in the 1977 symposium, one, Andrew M. Greeley of the University of Chicago, is a leading exponent of ethnicity; the other, Stephen Steinberg of Queens College, is a strong skeptic of ethnicity as a viable concept. Dr. Greeley, as director of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism and the National Opinions and Research Center, provided outstanding demographic data about the leading eastern and southern European ethnic groups. He stated that between 1940 and 1970, these groups achieved not only parity but superiority in the American educational and economic struggle: "The stereotype of the 'blue-collar ethnic' then is demonstrably false of the ethnics born after 1920, a group which for the most part would be the sons and daughters of immigrants. It took just one generation to eliminate the blue-collar fact. For those born after 1920, the more appropriate appellation would be 'white-collar ethnic.' But myths yield grudgingly to facts." Prof. Steinberg conceded that ethnicity is certain to remain a potent force in American society for the foreseeable future. However, he agreed with Gunnar Myrdal that this new ethnicity lacks clarity in meaning and content and that "therefore one must characterize this movement as
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upper-class intellectual romanticism." The prediction is that the fad of ethnicity will eventually pass and be forgotten due to the likely erosion of the ethnic cultures and communities in the United States. Another strong critic of the new ethnicity is the Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, author of Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse. He has contended that the recent revival is dangerous because it plays down the real issues of poverty and unemployment in the search for roots and psychocultural identity, that it obscures the tough issues of racism, sexism and environmental assault. Patterson calls for a universal culture with a truly egalitarian social order best described by the replacement of a chauvinistic ethnicity with humanistic socialism.

Irving Howe, author of World of Our Fathers, offered a more modulated support of this position. After conceding the sentimental and nostalgic appeal of ethnicity, Howe claimed that ethnicity: “misreads or ignores the realities of power in America. The central problems of our society have to do, not with ethnic grouping, but with economic policy, social rule, class relation...vast inequities of wealth,...high levels of unemployment.” Raising our racial and ethnic consciousness, according to this view, will divert us from the social and political militancy necessary to effect changes toward a more equitable society, such as democratic socialism.

A useful summary statement of the rationale of ethnicity comes from the U.S. Civil Rights Commission’s Civil Rights Digest of fall 1978. The entire issue deals with “Ethnicity Made in the U.S.,” and it is pointed out that even white ethnic groups who have “made it” suffer from prejudice and stereotyping, and that while “ethnicity has its uses and misuses,...most observers readily agree that a healthy respect for diversity can form the basis of a sounder coalition for social justice for all Americans.”

Kathleen McCourt, a sociologist at Loyola University (Chicago), in an article on the “Self-Conscious Neighborhood,” has provided an “ombudsmanlike” position on the impact of ethnicity on Americans who live in cities: “In one sense, it is not very important at all. There is no evidence that a majority of the white, non-Hispanic individuals beyond the second generation interpret much of their daily experience in ethnic terms.” However, in other ways the ethnic experience has been and continues to be both real and important. McCourt’s case is as follows:

1. Americans are products of particular ethnic histories, and there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that the impact of those histories continues to shape individual behavior today, such as:
a. involvement of Irish in electoral politics;
b. special emphasis by Jews on education for their children;
c. differing responses of Irish, Italians and Jews to pain;
d. reluctance of East Europeans to leave a neighborhood when it goes through racial change; and

e. importance of family ties to Catholics and Jews as compared with Protestants.

2. Ethnicity is a salient group characteristic in some situations for some groups, e.g., the reaction of Jews to the projected Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois, and the efforts of the Italians to form their own antidefamation league to overcome negative stereotypes in the media.

3. The ethnic experience is being reproduced today for other, more recent immigrants. For example, the easing of immigration laws has brought into New York City alone significant numbers of Latin Americans, East Asians, Israelis, and Russians.

4. The ethnic experience is the country's working-class history. The past struggles of today's grandparents and great-grandparents are not lost on the new generation of sons and daughters, despite today's upward mobility.

There is much to consider in the appraisal of the role of ethnicity in the body politic, especially in our local communities. The positions presented above must be carefully examined to avoid any "pie in the sky" approach to the ethnic groups which surround the neighborhood branches of the public library. Understanding the parameters of ethnicity as reflected in the behavior and attitudes of people is a basic requirement of all professionals, both librarians and others whose prime responsibility is community service.

**Impact of Ethnicity on Interpersonal and/or Interethnic Relations: Diverse Value Systems**

The raison d'etre for delving so deeply into the ramifications of ethnicity is to extrapolate information dealing with behavior and attitudes which distinguish the different ethnic groups so that these citizens can be dealt with more effectively as prospective library patrons. There is a great deal to be learned about the groups served in terms of sensitivity, understanding and precise knowledge about ethnic lifestyles both in cognitive and emotional patterns.

For help in this very delicate area, we must turn to workers in the mental health field. According to Joseph Giordano, director of the Louis Caplan Center on Group Indentity and Mental Health (which is part of the American Jewish Committee's Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity), a flexible multiethnic approach is necessary in services to those ethnic groups calling for neighborhood preservation and
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expansion of mental health facilities. In *Ethnicity and Mental Health*, he maintained that ethnicity from a clinical point of view is more than a distinctiveness defined by race, religion, national origin, or geography: "It involves conscious and unconscious processes that fulfill a deep psychological need for security, identity, and a sense of historical continuity. It is transmitted in an emotional language within the family and is reinforced by similar units in the community." In other words, we must know more about the cultural and ethnic factors in behavior which can be identified by studying the pervasive norms, customs, values, and roles that surround our institutional life.

Pursuing this line of thought further, Richard Baron, research associate at Horizon House Institute, pointed out that "only in the last decade has the view of America as the successful 'melting pot' been seriously challenged by sociologists, and only recently have mental health professionals been willing to admit that community treatment services have fallen short of their goals in ethnic communities." He proposed that services to minority groups require awareness of special needs and solutions to overcome biased generalizations. Sensitivity to specific group needs is necessary here as well as in the field of library services.

Many more studies are needed of the kind done by Corinne Azen Krause in her book *Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters*. This was an oral history study of ethnicity, mental health and continuity of 225 Jewish, Italian and Slavic-American women encompassing three generations, supported by the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity. The study was an effort to identify specific information about the relationship between cultural background and the experiences, attitudes and values of ethnic women. Overall, the evidence points to the enduring strength of ethnicity. More than 60 percent of the young women interviewed viewed their identity as "important" and felt an attachment both to their own ethnic community and to people elsewhere who share their heritage. At the same time, young women are also becoming more alike across ethnic lines. One surprising finding was the high proportion of women who considered learning the European language of origin important; several were found to be studying Italian, Slovak or Yiddish. These findings are again a reminder to professionals that they must take family relationships into serious account in the effort to provide effective services.

Another example of a pertinent study is one done by Frances E. Kobrin and Calvin Goldscheider, entitled *The Ethnic Factor in Family Structure and Mobility*. The authors surveyed 3342 cases in Rhode
Island involving families of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, plus French Canadians, Irish, Italians, and Portuguese. They insisted that studies of family behavior and social mobility are incomplete if they ignore ethnic variations. The data here, for example, show that variation in marriage behavior is greater among Catholic French Canadian, Irish, Italian, and Portuguese groups than between Protestant and Catholic groups. Many other areas of social behavior show similar results. The keynote is diversity as well as ethnicity.

Development of Programs and Services with an Ethnic Content

In order to design library programs with an ethnic content, there must be a gestalt, an integrated approach based on the understanding that we live in a country not only pluralistic in the general sense, but multiethnic. For the past fifteen years, under pressure from ethnic and professional groups, publishers have made significant strides in making available library materials dealing with ethnic minorities. Library collections already reflect this significant output by the publishing world. This does not mean we have solved the problem of providing sufficient and adequate multiethnic materials. Clearly, we can still use more and better-quality materials that deal with ethnicity. However, it is important that the ethnic patrons for whom these materials are intended be drawn into the library orbit by alert and understanding professionals who are prepared with services meaningful to these patrons. The dividend for the profession in successful approaches to the ethnic minorities is that these citizens become not only friends of the library, but also stalwart and vigorous supporters of libraries around budget time.

How is this programming to be carried out unless it is done as a special approach for a particular group? Unfortunately, the delegates to the November 1979 White House Conference on Library and Information Services, under pressure to finish their business within a very punishing deadline, voted down a resolution by petition that made a strong plea for legislation to support library services for ethnic groups; they claimed it represented special pleading. In order to reach a substantial segment of the population which is unserved by libraries, it makes sense to pay greater attention to the ethnic minorities in local communities. If we do not accept this challenge to the profession, we may have to call another White House conference to deal explicitly with this problem.

A document was prepared for the White House conference entitled,
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Issues and Resolutions: A Summary of Pre-conference Activities. It represents the myriad resolutions and recommendations from fifty-seven governor's conferences and many professional societies and associations. Concerned citizens from all over America wrote hundreds of letters. Following is a concise outline of what was said about the library's support, through activities performed by libraries, government and educational institutions, for meeting personal needs (theme 1 of the conference) with a focus on ethnic identity and cultural heritage.

Libraries should:
1. Place a high priority on determining the ethnic makeup of the community to develop relevant collections and services.
2. Extend ethnic services.
3. Set up programs designed to acquaint librarians with multicultural literature.
4. Recruit volunteers of all ethnic backgrounds and provide orientation, coordination and continued education.
5. Develop collections that reflect the cultural heritage of the community.
6. Maintain up-to-date collections with materials reflecting the minority characteristics of the American society.
7. Designate one library as a multi-ethnic branch where cultural and ethnic materials are housed and personnel are trained and knowledgeable.
8. Through public service announcements, emphasize to the public the need and importance of preserving our past records and history.
9. Present television documentaries of past events and their effect on the lifestyle we have grown accustomed to.

Government should:
1. Develop flexible funding policies which allow free access to information on various cultures and ethnic groups.
2. Provide financial and other incentives to promote more acquisition of cross-cultural and ethnic materials by libraries.
3. Enact a "national Indian omnibus library bill," to include funding for training of certified [North American] Indian library workers, materials and dissemination, construction, technical assistance to new or developing libraries, services to Indian studies programs, an information needs survey and special purpose program grants and contracts.
4. Establish a "national Indian library center," Indian library networks, Indian library consortium, legislative set-asides and interagency coordination of Indian library services.
5. Make available Federal funds for the collection and dissemination of traditional items of ethnic folk expression, both verbal and nonverbal.
6. Contribute funds to state and local government for the purpose of fostering access to information on cultural heritage.
7. Develop criteria and standards for Indian libraries and focus on library information programs by Indian organizations.
8. Support Indian writing and publication and establish continuing communication with Indian tribes and organizations.
Educational Institutions should:
1. Include required courses on ethnic, cultural, bilingual and human relations in the education curriculum for librarianship.
2. Provide schools with library collections which include literature depicting varied cultures and ethnic groups in a realistic manner.

This is a creative and demanding grassroots agenda which should be followed up with tremendous lobbying efforts by professionals and citizens who believe a multiethnic America needs to be strengthened and unified by library services with a multiethnic content.

On April 1, 1980, the 1980 U.S. census began to count the population in the country. Final results will be available by January 1, 1981. The census form contains seven questions about personal identity, marital status and ethnic background of each household member. What a tremendous challenge these results will be to the library profession in reaching ethnic groups in the neighborhoods! The programs and services developed should contain the following basic principles:

1. There must be a strong community involvement in the design and operation of all programs, once it has been ascertained that they are needed and desirable.
2. Finely tuned service delivery systems which take into account cultural patterns and traditions must be built on the existing community network of neighborhoods, church, ethnic, and social groups.
3. Trained professionals must be thoroughly sensitized to the social, familial, ethnic, economic, and political characteristics of the people in their neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Through the work of the Library Training Section of the U.S. Office of Education, institute programs to train librarians for service to minority groups have been developed at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies. Since 1972 the school has been engaged in sensitizing professionals to the needs of ethnic minorities. At first, programs concentrated on the so-called disadvantaged minorities, i.e., blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and native Americans, but were subsequently expanded to cover all other racial and ethnic minorities who are subjected to prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping. A commonality of interest in the problems confronting the ethnic minorities in our country was found. Overcoming these problems and strengthening the identity and pride of these groups will be necessary in developing a consensus for neighborhood coalitions. The library profession can contribute to this advance in human intergroup relations by its concerns, commitment and extraordinary services to the ethnic groups in the urban centers of the United States.
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References

1. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, S.V. "ethnicity."
Additional References