

Teaching Ethnic Minority Studies with a Focus on Culture

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INDIVIDUALS who constitute an *ethnic* group share a common set of values, behavior patterns, and other culture elements which differ from those of the larger population. An *ethnic minority* group shares a culture and possesses unique physical characteristics which enable persons who belong to the dominant group to easily identify its members and to treat them in a discriminatory way.

Ethnic minority studies consist of the scientific and humanistic analysis of the unique cultures and institutions within minority communities. However, because the experiences of dominant white groups and those of ethnic minorities are so intimately related, and many myths have been created to justify the exploitation of minorities, myths about dominant white groups are shattered when students learn the hidden facts about minority groups.

Responding largely to student demands and community pressure groups, educational institutions at all levels have made some attempts to put more information about Blacks, Chicanos, Indians, Puerto Ricans, and Orientals into the curriculum. Despite these efforts, few minority studies programs are sound because they were created in crisis situations and their goals remain confused and ambiguous. Most lack clear rationales, and were implemented without adequate teacher training and sufficient input from ethnic experts, minority students, and community groups.

Most teachers who teach ethnic studies use new materials but the same strategies which have alienated white students. To create effective ethnic studies programs, we need *both* new goals and novel teaching strategies, such as role playing, simulation, inquiry techniques, and community action projects. Trivial facts about Louis Tewanima do not interest the Indian child any more than such facts about George Washington interest the white child. Ethnic content is not intrinsically motivating. It is necessary but not sufficient for an effective program in minority studies.

Who Needs Ethnic Minority Studies?

Ethnic studies are needed by *all* students to help them to understand themselves and the social world in which they live. The minority experience is part of the human experience, and education should deal with the *total* experience of man. The primary goal of ethnic studies should be to help students develop the ability to make intelligent decisions so that they can resolve personal

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problems and, through social action, influence public policy and develop a sense of political efficacy.

The cultures of *all* of America's minority groups can make unique contributions to the development of students' decision-making and social action skills. It is especially important for teachers to help students to make intelligent decisions and to participate in social action in times when rhetoric is often substituted for reason, and when simplistic solutions are often proposed as answers to complicated racial problems.

To develop the ability to make sound decisions, students must master higher level interdisciplinary knowledge, which consists of social science concepts, generalizations, and theories. Students need key concepts from all disciplines to make important decisions on the social issues which face us today. While higher level interdisciplinary knowledge is necessary for students to make sound decisions, it is not sufficient. They must also be able to identify and clarify their *values* before they can take concerted actions on America's social problems.

Ethnic Content and Culture

Content related to America's diverse minorities is excellent for teaching *all* students the concepts and generalizations which are necessary to make decisions on social issues, and to help them to clarify their values which are related to the immense racial problems which are polarizing our nation.

Culture, a key anthropological concept, should be a central concept in any curriculum which deals seriously with ethnic minorities and the realities of American society. Culture consists of the unique behavior patterns, belief systems, artifacts, and other man-made components of a society or a community within a society. Since there are diverse culture elements within the cultures of America's ethnic minorities, students can learn important generalizations about *culture* when studying minority groups.

Units and lessons on Indians, Chicanos, Blacks, Orientals, and Puerto Ricans, if approached from an anthropological perspective, can help students to broaden their understanding and conception of what it means to be *human,* and enable them to better understand their own cultures and life styles. Students should be helped to discover that while man is born with the physical capacities to become human, an individual becomes human only by learning the culture of his group. This learning process is called *enculturation.*

Since cultures are man-made, there are many ways of being human. The white middle class life style is one way; the Black ghetto culture still another. By studying this important generalization, students will hopefully develop an appreciation for man's great capacity to create a diversity of life styles and to adapt to a variety of social and physical environments.[1] Alex Weingrod writes,

[1] For a fascinating discussion and further examples of this point see: Gene Lisitzky. *Four Ways of Being Human: An Introduction to Anthropology.* New York: The Viking Press, 1956. This book can be profitably read by both students and teachers.

"It is at once an humbling and widening experience to learn that others have met and resolved some universal problems in a manner other than the familiar ones." [2]

During their study of minority cultures, students can learn that while human beings have many of the same basic needs, such as love, protection, and security, different cultures within our society have devised a great variety of means to satisfy these needs. The religious ceremonies of the Hopi Indians, Black soul food and spirituals, and the Jewish matrimony ritual illustrate the wide range of culture elements within our society.

Most groups tend to think that their culture is superior to all others. Ethnographies indicate that many preliterate groups used words that described themselves as "The People" or "Human Beings"; the implication was that outside groups were less than human. Chauvinist ethnocentrism is especially acute among dominant groups in American society. When students study and understand the cultures of America's ethnic minorities, they will be more likely to consider minority group persons as *humans*. Research suggests that, with understanding, tolerance sometimes follows.[3]

While the teacher should help children to see and understand the cultural differences within our society, students should also become aware of the many ways in which all human groups are alike. All human cultures have families, power relationships, a division between male and female roles, and ways of resolving the problems of scarcity. However, these culture elements often take diverse forms. Nevertheless, the teacher should not emphasize differences to the neglect of important similarities in human cultures. Students should know how closely they are related to all human groups—both biologically and culturally. Anthropologists call the many ways in which all human groups are related *culture universals*.

[2] Alex Weingrod. "Anthropology and the Social Studies." In: Martin Feldman and Eli Seifman, editors. *The Social Studies: Structure, Models and Strategies*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969. p. 268. Reprinted from: *Social Education* 20 (1): 5-9; January 1956.

[3] For a summary of this research see: James A. Banks. "Racial Prejudice and the Black Self-Concept." In: James A. Banks and Jean Dresden Grambs, editors. *Black Self-Concept: Implications for Education and Social Science*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972. pp. 5-35.

Seeing Ourselves by Studying Others

Anthropological concepts can also help students to better understand their own cultures. As Kluckhohn perceptively wrote, "Anthropology holds up a great mirror to man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety." [4] *We can best view our own behavior from the perspective of another culture.* By studying about other ways of being and living, students will see how bound they are by their own values, perceptions, and prejudices. The cultures of our powerless ethnic groups, and the oppressive and devastating experiences of America's Black, brown, and red peoples are shocking testimony to the criminal effects of racism on its victims.

Thus ethnic content can serve as an ex-

[4] Clyde Kluckhohn. *Mirror For Man*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965. p. 19.



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The cultures of minority groups can make unique contributions to our society.

cellent lens to help white America to see and truly know itself since white racism is deeply implicated in the cultures of America's ethnic minorities. The fact that many white Americans accept myths about minority groups without question indicates how bound they are by their own values and prejudices. Hopefully, ethnic content, when viewed from an anthropological perspective, can help release white Americans from this kind of psychological captivity.

Expanding Students' Concepts of Humans

Another anthropological concept which can enhance an ethnic studies program is *cultural relativism*. The cultural relativist assumes that because each culture is somewhat different, what is considered normal in one society or community may be judged abnormal in another. Thus standards developed within one culture cannot justifiably be used to judge behavior in another since all cultures are equally valid. "The values expressed in any culture . . . are to be both understood and valued only according to how the peoples concerned set up their view of life." [5]

Recently, this concept has been attacked because it can obviously be abused. It can be used to justify racism as well as culture tolerance. However, students should be aware of this concept since it can help them to see that behavior in other cultures which they consider strange is often quite meaningful and functional to the peoples who practice it. The Black ghetto dialect is quite systematic and functional to the Black child within his local environment; his white teachers and classmates, however, may have difficulty understanding why he uses it.

Ethnic studies must help all students to expand their conceptions of what it means to be *human*, to accept the fact that minority cultures are functional and valid, and that a culture can be evaluated only within a particular social context. A culture trait which is functional in one social setting may be quite dysfunctional in another. It is especially important for ethnic studies to help white students to expand their definitions of who is human, since many whites seem to believe that they are the only humans on earth. The differential reactions to the Kent State and Jackson State tragedies by the majority of white Americans suggest that many whites did not include the Jackson State victims within their conceptions of humanity.



Photo courtesy Zita Lichtenberg

Different cultures have devised a rich variety of means to satisfy universal needs.

Facilitating the Identity Quest by Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic studies must facilitate the quest by minority group students to shape new identities and to rediscover their unique culture elements which have been lost and stolen. The school can promote these identity quests by incorporating elements of their history and culture into the *entire* school curriculum. Creating special courses in In-

[5] Felix Keesing. *Cultural Anthropology: The Science of Custom*. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1958. p. 181.



Photo courtesy Zita Lichtenberg

Value inquiry is an essential part of ethnic studies.

dian and Chicano history will not suffice, although such courses should be available for those who wish to take them, especially in the higher grades.

A substantial body of research suggests that teachers often reject the cultures of minority groups and expect little academically from minority group students.[6] Teachers should have a thorough understanding and respect for cultures which differ from their own. Anthropological insights can help teachers become more sensitive to other cultures. Every teacher has an important role to play in ethnic education. It is imperative that teachers expect more from minority group students and develop more positive attitudes toward their cultures because teacher attitudes and expectations have a profound effect on student attitudes, perceptions, self-concepts, and behavior.[7] Pre- and in-service programs in the teaching of ethnic groups and their cultures are essential before a sound approach in minority studies can be developed in either a segregated or multiethnic school.

Although anthropology can make a major contribution to the study of minority groups because it is concerned with the *totality* of cultures, key concepts from other disciplines such as *socialization* (sociology), *power* (political science), *scarcity* (economics), *change* (history), *region* (geography), and *self-concept* (psychology) should be incorporated into a sound minority studies program. *Value inquiry* is also an essential component of ethnic studies. Elsewhere, I have discussed in detail how other social science concepts and value inquiry can be taught in an ethnic studies program.[8]

The humanities should be used to teach key social science concepts and generalizations.[9] To teach the sociological concept of *discrimination*, the teacher can read selections from books such as Lorenz Graham's poignant and gripping story, *Whose Town?* and Kristin Hunter's powerful novel, *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou.* Poetry can also be used to teach this concept. Claude McKay's anguished poem, "If We Must Die," is a bitter and evocative protest of the racism which Blacks experienced in the early 1900's.

Not since the turn of the century has our nation faced racial problems of such an immense magnitude. As the movement by ethnic minorities to gain power and to release themselves from oppression has escalated, reactions by the white community have intensified. Some social commentators believe that violent confrontation will be the only way in which our racial problems will be resolved, and they predict racial wars. No sensitive observer of American society can deny the seriousness of our current racial crisis. If decisive steps are not taken *immediately* to eliminate racism and ethnic hostility in America, we may not only fail to help whites to become less ethnocentric and facilitate the identity quest by powerless minority groups, but we may fail as *human* society. □

[6] One of the more recent of such studies is: Eleanor B. Leacock. *Teaching and Learning in City Schools.* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969.

[7] For empirical support of this statement, see Chapter 4 of James A. Banks and William W. Joyce, editors. *Teaching Social Studies to Culturally Different Children.* Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1971. pp. 112-44.

[8] James A. Banks. *Teaching the Black Experience: Methods and Materials.* Palo Alto, California: Fearon Publishers, Inc., 1970. Also, James A. Banks. "Teaching Black History with a Focus on Decision-Making." *Social Education* (in press).

[9] For an excellent guide to books for young readers see: Augusta Baker. *The Black Experience in Children's Books.* New York: The Public Library, 1971. Available for 50¢ from the New York Public Library, Office of Children's Services, 8 East 40th Street, New York, New York 10016.

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