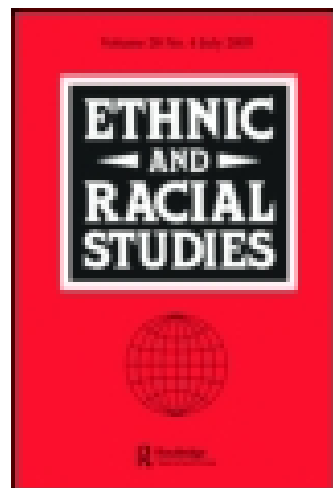


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Ethnicity and industrial relations : an Israeli factory case study*

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In Israel socially defined ethnic categories form a basis for group differentiation.¹ The distinction frequently emphasized is that between 'Oriental' Jews and 'European' Jews.² While Oriental and European Jews differ in their cultural and religious traditions, the more visible and persistent distinctions are those related to social class.³ A recent study⁴ reveals that even if education is controlled, ethnic origin is still statistically a better predictor of incumbency of high level positions than it was ten years ago.

Ethnic inequality is an important political issue, with ramifications in most areas where people compete publicly for resources. It is exploited and manipulated by the political leadership of parties, trade unions and other pressure groups.⁵ While there is considerable literature on the subject of immigrant absorption and ethnic relations in various fields,⁶ little attention has been paid to the ways ethnicity affects interaction at work.⁷ There is a dearth of literature, both in Israel and elsewhere, on the ways in which ethnicity enters the factory, and the role it plays in shaping the social situation on the shop floor.

Ethnicity is an aspect of social identity that employees bring with them from the wider society to the factory.⁸ At times it remains latent; participants may then explain that it is irrelevant in the factory. At other times, however, it is activated and becomes a manifest element in social interaction. This occurs when one or more actors introduce ethnicity as relevant to the construction of the social definition of the situation.

The objective of this paper is to identify some of the conditions under which ethnic identity will remain latent, and conversely, those in which it will become manifest.⁹ It is based on an anthropological study of the main assembly department of an Israeli television plant. I spent twelve months of field-work in the Zed factory (1969–70) as a participant observer, trying, among other things, to observe ethnicity in a work context.¹⁰

I expected that ethnicity would enter political relations in the factory,

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that is, as an element in the competition for power and resources; that it would be selectively used by individuals or groups to advance some interest. The incongruence between the egalitarian ethos and reality always permits accusations of prejudice or discrimination. This is a common tactic – it is usually used as a lever to gain some advantage that those who use it believe would be otherwise denied to them or to those in whose name they speak.

I expected that ethnicity would appear relevant in the factory where it was associated with or overlapped other bases for differentiation and co-operation, such as formal status, seniority, occupation, work group or income group. Each of these categories gives rise to common interests. Under such conditions:

(a) Ethnic origin serves as a solidary base for group formation and recruitment. The overlap between group differences in ethnic origin, with dissimilarities in status position or situation in the factory, enables those in whose interest it is to do so, to claim a causal connection between the two.¹¹

(b) Ethnicity is used as a banner for mobilizing support. It is part of the 'rhetoric of motives'¹² for legitimating a pattern of behaviour or a claim to some resource rather than the underlying reason for the action.

Research findings

While my theoretical assumptions were not invalidated, ethnicity did not manifest itself in the ways anticipated. It seemed to be irrelevant for explaining daily interaction which could be better understood in other terms of reference. I observed several disputes in which I expected that ethnic origin would be referred to, but it was not. It was rarely used by individuals (and never by groups) to support a claim for special consideration or to explain either success or failure in the factory.

Common cultural background was one basis of attraction among workers in their informal relations. It seemed less important, however, than similarity in age, marital status, work group, or other bases of attraction.

Ethnic origin and ethnic differences were occasional subjects of discussion. When the workers discussed ethnic differences the conversation took one or both of the following courses:

(1) It would be brought to an abrupt end with a remark such as 'But there is no real difference, we are all Jews.' The abruptness with which such conversations were terminated indicated a desire to avoid issues which were likely to arouse hostilities and tensions and to split the workers into opposing alignments. References to the common fact of being Jewish, to supreme national values or to the 'enemy across the border' emphasized the unity of the workers.

(2) The discussion of ethnic inequality was usually kept impersonal and removed from the immediate work context as something relevant 'out there, but not here in the factory'. It was, for example, referred to as the reason for the superior achievements of Europeans in the wider society, outside the factory. Workers told me that 'here in the factory ethnicity plays no role'.

This was a definition of the factory situation as most workers perceived it, and not merely a normative statement of values and ideals.

Why was ethnic origin of little consequence in certain situations? Goffman's analysis of social encounters is here instructive. He notes that '... certain social attributes are excluded from significance in wide ranges of encounters'.¹³ Ethnicity is such an attribute. It is a diffuse element in the social environment; an immanent category through which social reality is filtered. When it appears irrelevant, it is because it has been 'defined out' of the situation. '... We can think of inhibitory rules that tell participants what they must not attend to and of facilitating rules that tell them what they may recognize.'¹⁴

The 'inhibitory rules' in the factory did not require that participants 'disattend' the fact of ethnic identity. Cultural differences as revealed in food tastes and ritual practices were occasionally discussed. Recent immigrants described life in the 'old country' to those willing to listen. The rules did require that ethnicity be considered as having no influence over what happened in the factory. The central problem of this paper is to identify the conditions which activate or submerge the political relevance of ethnicity.

In the next section I show that there were factors which militated against the activation of ethnicity as a mobilizing principle, and constrained the actors from ordering social relationships on an ethnic basis. Conditions in the social structure of the factory and in the market place were conducive to a definition of the factory situation as one in which ethnicity was irrelevant.

The factory context

Fieldwork was conducted during a period of general economic prosperity, when market demand for the factory's product exceeded the supply. The Zed factory was in a process of rapid expansion aimed at increasing output and developing the local production of parts. During 1969, the main assembly department expanded from 48 to 72 workers; 42 women, 30 men, all Jews. Of the 42 women, 28 were of Oriental origin, 14 of European origin. The origins of the 42 women accounted for 16 different countries. The ethnic origins of the male workers were similarly varied.¹⁵

Work was conducted on three manually-paced assembly lines. Most jobs in the department were classified as unskilled, although management believed workers required at least eight years of formal education to perform them adequately. There were a few jobs which required several days of on-the-job training, and a handful of repair jobs which were performed by workers with some technical education. The department was managed by a supervisor who reported directly to the production manager. Both men were Europeans. The Oriental senior technician was also foreman of two assembly lines.

The social composition of the labour force

The fact that differences in ethnic origin exist is not in itself an indication that these differences are socially relevant. They become so when they

coalesce with other forms of cultural or social differences, such as economic and social inequality.¹⁶ The association of some form of inequality with ethnic difference makes ethnicity relevant as a sign of social identity – or, in Banton's terms,¹⁷ as a 'role sign'.

In the assembly department, ethnic origin did not coalesce with any other form of social differentiation which may have activated or emphasized its sign value. While not all social assets were distributed equally among the various ethnic groups and sub-groups, each was in possession of some resources which gave it a claim to social status in the factory – resources such as skill, formal schooling, knowledge of the Hebrew language, and work seniority.

Female workers in the department

n = 41: Europeans = 13 'Orientals' = 28

	Average age	Average no. of years in Israel*	Average years of schooling
Europeans	28.9	5.3	11
'Orientals'	21	13.1	9.5

*Does not include the nine workers born in Israel – seven 'Orientals' and two Europeans.

The differences in formal education, which are so significant for differentiating between Orientals and Europeans in other social contexts, were of little importance in the factory. There were three reasons for this: (1) The recruitment policy was largely dictated by both technological requirements and demographic conditions, which led to a concentration of young Israeli-educated Orientals and excluded the less educated (and often illiterate) older Oriental women.

(2) Individually, not all of the Europeans had more formal schooling than did all of the Orientals.

(3) The higher educational achievement level of most European women, particularly the new Russian immigrants, many of whom had some college training, was not reflected in the jobs they did. It was also offset as a basis for social status, by their 'lack of education' in other areas such as knowledge of the Hebrew language and of the country.

Thus, while the Europeans had more formal schooling on the average, most were recent immigrants, few spoke Hebrew well and some did not speak it at all. They were also older, on the average, than the Orientals, and most were married and had children, which made them less mobile and limited their alternatives in the labour market. On the other hand, most of the Orientals had grown up in Israel, spoke Hebrew well, and were both younger and more mobile. There were both Orientals and Europeans among the old-timers, but the majority of the newest workers were from Eastern Europe.

Ethnicity was not associated with either skill or efficiency. Nor was it related to the major sources of popularity in the department – such as

readiness to help others earn their premium, and the ability to speak freely with peers as well as with formal superiors.

Despite the diversity of ethnic origins, the factory workers were culturally homogeneous in an important sense: they were all urban dwellers and shared a set of urban norms. These common urban norms were relevant for minimizing visible differences between people of different ethnic backgrounds. The women dressed in similar fashion and observed more or less the same social etiquette. The unique aspects of ethnic communal traditions did not manifest themselves in the factory; these were more likely reflected in spheres outside work, such as in religious life and kinship ties.

The division of labour and interest groups

The principles by which work is divided and rewards are distributed in a factory generate important stimuli for group formation.¹⁸ The division into functional departments¹⁹ between skilled and unskilled workers,²⁰ between occupational groupings,²¹ and between old-timers and new workers,²² give rise to interests that pull some workers closer together — often in opposition to other workers or to management.

In the Zed factory certain interests linked the workers, sometimes on the basis of their production group, sometimes on the basis of occupation and skill category, and sometimes on the basis of seniority or wage classification. What is important to this analysis is that ethnic differentiation did not coincide with any of these, but cut across them. Both Orientals and Europeans were found in each of the functional departments; both were among the newly-hired and the old-timers; both were among daily and salaried workers. Ethnicity also cut across divisions based on age, sex and local neighbourhood. In other words, it did not overlap with any of the properties that linked workers in common interest. Consequently, it was not a suitable strategy for mobilizing support, since those whose allegiance was sought did not share a common ethnic origin. For example, the workers on assembly line 3 complained that the technicians on the line were not entitled to share the group production bonus, since the technicians repaired sets but did not assemble them. In another dispute, the old-timers in the factory demanded that their seniority be reflected to a much greater extent in the difference between their pay and that of newly hired workers. In both cases, the categories that were joined in a common cause were ethnically heterogeneous. This situation is in contrast to those studied by Warner and Collins.²³

Market conditions and the margin of profit

In periods of economic prosperity, when resources are *plentiful and accessible*, ethnicity is less likely to enter as relevant to situational definitions. When ethnicity is not an explicitly legitimate basis according to which rights and obligations are distributed, it is less likely to be introduced into the situation when alternative more legitimate bases are available. Conversely, strong down-

ward pressure on wages and intensive competition for scarce resources (including work security) are conditions favourable to the activation of ethnic identity as a relevant element in the situation.

During 1969, the conditions of economic prosperity and a tight labour market intensified the upward pressure on wages, particularly in the rapidly expanding metal and electronic industries. By the end of that year, the actual wage paid workers (in the form of unworked overtime, unearned production bonuses and so forth) throughout these industries were considerably higher than the terms stated in the collective work agreement. In the Zed factory, there were two additional conditions which greatly strengthened the workers' bargaining position. These were: (1) The high margin of profit earned on the sale of each television set, and (2) the pressure put on the plant management from the Board to exploit the intensive market demand (which was believed to be temporary) for the factory's product.

Readiness to work overtime, to work faster, to 'fill in' wherever needed during such times became services for which workers could exact a special price. Newly hired technicians, because of their scarcity in the market and their small numbers in the factory, were in the best position to strike a good deal, simply by agreeing to accept employment. Old-timers who stood to lose their work compensation pay if they left the factory (and thus were less mobile) resorted to other tactics, such as withdrawal of cooperation in order to pressure for increased remuneration.

Writing about the effect of industrialization on race relations in Brazil, Bastide notes that '... in periods of prosperity and rapid economic development, it has tended to make social tensions predominate over racial tensions.'²⁴

If a recession were to occur, bringing with it contractions of the labour market, it is possible that the prejudices, stereotypes and discriminations which remain latent would again be aroused and would tear the proletariat apart.²⁵

During periods of intense economic competition, social divisions in the larger society intrude themselves more forcibly into the workplace.²⁶

The managerial position

Not all participants in the factory system have equal power to define for others what is permissible in any situation. Managers who control strategic resources usually have greater influence over situational definitions than do lower participants. Studies indicate that management's stand concerning ethnic and race relations at work can be a determining factor in the nature of these relations.²⁷

The situational conditions within which the management of Zed operated made it in their interest that ethnic origin be considered irrelevant to the distribution of work and rewards in the factory. There were two main reasons for this:

(1) The tight labour market and the factory's need for new workers put pres-

sure on management to hire whoever had at least the minimal requirements in formal schooling and technical dexterity. Although some managers privately expressed a personal preference for workers of one ethnic category over another — because they thought they were more disciplined, diligent or dexterous, these stereotypical typologies were used more frequently as *post facto* explanations for behaviour in particular situations than as guidelines for hiring or promoting workers.

(2) Despite their declarations that ethnicity was irrelevant, some top managers considered it to be a potentially potent and disruptive factor. The production manager explained to me:

Ethnic tension is there. It's beneath the surface, but it can erupt. When ethnic trouble starts, it comes in waves and can get out of hand. As soon as it starts, I rush in and smooth things out. I have to be on my guard. For example, during the Six Day War [June, 1967] Jacques jokingly said that the Egyptians would soon be in Tel Aviv and would kill all the *Vus-Vus* [pejorative term for European Jews]. The workers got furious with him and it nearly came to blows. The news reached me quickly. I rushed to the lunchroom and took Jacques to my office. We talked the thing over and decided that he would explain that he had been misunderstood. I had a chat with some of the men and ironed out the matter.

Piecing together information from several sources, it seems that Jacques, a man in his forties, had not been drafted. He had come to Israel from Iraq, and had been working in the factory for 15 years. His native tongue was Arabic. During the War, he listened to the Arab radio broadcasts from across the border. Jacques' comment that the Arabs would kill the *Vus-Vus* was a loaded one. Europeans frequently refer to Orientals as Arabs because the majority of them emigrated from Moslem countries and are in many ways culturally similar to the people among whom they lived. Studies indicate that Orientals express more negative attitudes towards Arabs than do Europeans. Peres explains that "by expressing hostility to Arabs, an Oriental attempts to rid himself of the "inferior" Arabic elements in his own identity and to adopt a position congenial to the European group which he desires to emulate."²⁸ Jacques' comment, by implication, linked him with the Arabs against the Europeans. It was such a reversal of accepted norms that in other circumstances the comment might even be taken as humorous. What is both significant and typical in this case is that the production manager was immediately informed of what was going on in the lunchroom, and that he stepped in promptly to resolve the incident.

The speed with which the manager was informed of 'trouble' and with which he responded was an important element in its early resolution. Incidents involving ethnicity were confined and prevented from escalating. Management's insistence that ethnicity be defined as irrelevant to what happened reflected the more general concern to avoid trouble and to keep things quiet in the factory.

Disagreements defined in ethnic terms were considered to be harder to

handle than those defined in terms culturally prescribed as relevant to the factory system. In a factory, a worker's skill is traded for a higher occupational grade; loyalty is exchanged for other services. Conflicts are resolvable because agreement can be reached about the values to be assigned the various resources that are being exchanged. But what value should be assigned to ethnic origin? How does a manager pay for a worker being black? Higher wages and overtime are not effective currencies in exchanges involving ethnicity. Where used, they are usually one-sided payments made by management that open the door to future demands from workers. For this reason, ethnicity can, in certain circumstances, be an important resource for workers. Allegations of ethnic favouritism have tactical value, therefore managers prefer to avoid such issues.

The workers seemed to share the management's interest in avoiding trouble. When they wished to express approval of a fellow worker, they said of him, 'He's all right, he doesn't make trouble.' (*'Hu beseder, hu lo oseh baayot.'*)

Good relations not only made work more pleasant; it made it more profitable, since high bonus rates were earned on the basis of group output. The need for some measure of cooperation at work and the fact that most relationships lacked the depth of either time or multiple links, made it important that divisive issues be underplayed.

Conclusion

Contrary to theoretical expectations, ethnicity played a minor role in the factory. The congruence of interests in keeping it out of the picture, complemented by the lack of situational and structural factors likely to stimulate its activation, contributed to its remaining a latent factor.

Ethnicity in the work context, therefore, is theoretically problematic and not an obvious sociological variable from which to deduce other behavior and structures. As a sociological variable in the work context, ethnicity is not necessarily a basis for social solidarity or of interpersonal alliances and interactions.

Like femininity, motherhood or old age, it is an aspect of social identity, an externally based property that the worker brings to the factory. While the factory is, in some respects, sealed off from other social contexts by the specific demands of the industrial situation, it is also exposed to influences from the wider social environment with which it interacts and from which it recruits its personnel.²⁹

When ethnic identity is introduced as relevant to a situation it may be used to rally support, to mobilize resources, to legitimize a course of action, or to support a claim for special consideration or for exclusion from consideration. According to this theoretical perspective, ethnicity is neither the cause nor the goal, but a strategy adopted in the course of interaction. Like other elements in the social environment however, ethnicity is selectively handled. It is either introduced or excluded as circumscribed by the current definition of

the situation, as well as by the interests of the parties involved in sustaining or altering that definition (and their power to do so).³⁰

Notes

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25. *ibid.*, p. 25.
26. S. Cunnison's study (*Wages and Work Allocation*, London, 1965) of a waterproof-garment workshop during a slump reported that when other 'rational' explanations failed, workers sometimes used allegations of religious favoritism to explain the way in which work was allocated. This explanation is similar to E. E. Evans-Pritchard's view of witchcraft as an explanation for misfortune in particular situations: it is usual to explain '... the particular and variable conditions of an event and not the general and universal conditions...' (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Clarendon, 1963, p. 69). The belief in discrimination as in witchcraft, supplies the missing link in the causal chain which related Man to unfortunate events.
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