

Nikolai Genov (Ed.)

Advances in Sociological Knowledge

Over half a Century



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Stella R. Quah

Conceptualizing Ethnicity: In Search of Cognitive Innovations

Throughout the history of sociology the concern of scholars with ethnicity as an essential aspect of social interaction is found under a variety of research themes, including social stratification, race or ethnic relations, culture, comparative research and, more recently, under the rubric of cultural studies. As television and printed news worldwide corroborate, the violence of ethnic conflict brought ethnic matters to the realm of public discourse over the past two decades. World events have intensified the concern among social scientists given the acute impact of ethnic and religious differentiation upon social relations across the micro-macro spectrum of social relations in most countries. Have the intense research interest and wealth of studies offered significant innovations in our understanding of ethnicity? My tentative answer is 'no'. Despite the enormous body of social science literature on the subject, the scholarly efforts made over the past five decades have not improved upon Max Weber's fundamental grasp of ethnicity.

I will support this argument by referring first to the problem of innovation and creativity. Then, following three main research questions, I shall elaborate on some examples of contemporary analyses of ethnicity in the light of Weber's conceptual legacy.

Ideally, one needs to identify innovative and conceptually rigorous analyses in the large body of sociological literature that would elucidate what is ethnicity and how does ethnicity influence the individual's social action. Considering the impossibility to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the vast body of literature on ethnicity, it is prudent to use key examples and thus to illustrate main research trends and the corresponding lack of cognitive innovation in the contemporary analysis of ethnicity. At the most elementary level, the unit of analysis in this discussion of ethnicity and action will be the person as "social actor" (Weber, 1978: 385-86) or "acting self" (Giddens, 1993: 80). I am interested in the individual's *action* in so far as he or she engages in *social* or *communicative* action (Campbell, 1996: 92).

1. The Issue of Cognitive Innovations

Let us think of cognitive innovation as conceptual creativeness and originality rather than simply newness. Cognitive innovation occurs when concepts or theses on a particular phenomenon are replaced or substantially improved by new ones, or when new concepts or theses are proposed to explain new or previously unobserved phenomena. Following this definition, there have been no cognitive innovations in the study of culture and ethnicity as most of the conceptual work over the second half of the 20th century has been based on the ideas proposed by previous thinkers in classical sociology.

The dearth of cognitive innovation is by no means circumscribed to the study of ethnicity. Giddens (1993: 77) and Campbell (1996), among others, arrived at the same conclusion concerning the study of social action in their critical assessment of work conducted over the past decades by authors of various theoretical persuasions. Giddens' (1987, 1996) own structuration theory does not represent cognitive innovation given that the classics, particularly Weber, form the cornerstone of his theory. In their critical review of "Contemporary developments in sociological theory", Camic and Gross (1998) identify eight main developments or "intellectual projects" in sociological theory in the previous decade involving the building of analytical tools, the synthesis, refinement, discussion, enlargement and reconstruction of existing theories, and the diagnosis of "contemporary social conditions". Of the eight projects, the building of analytical tools would be the most promising for cognitive innovation in the analysis of ethnicity and culture and other essential social phenomena. Alas, as Camic and Gross lament, this project "is increasingly threatened by abstract, self-referential theorizing that distances itself from the substantive issues ... in empirical social research" (1998: 455). As part of the fifth of the eight projects identified by these authors, "enlargement/reconstruction of current theoretical approaches", Camic and Gross (1998: 463-464) highlight the call to remedy "an omission" of previous research: the need for a serious study of "fundamental categorical differences" such as gender, ethnicity and class, brought up by Lemert (1995) and Calhoun (1995). Studies on these differences have given the greatest attention to gender differences due mostly to the abundant research output of feminist writers. Authors that deal with women in ethnic minorities often give predominance to gender rather than ethnic differences.

It is against this backdrop that I will now support my argument that scholarly efforts made over the past five decades have not improved upon Max Weber's fundamental grasp of ethnicity. I shall do this in five steps: I will first discuss definitions of ethnicity to illustrate the long lifespan of Weber's legacy. I will then address in turn three main research questions derived from Weber's concepts, followed by the concluding observations.

2. The Long Lifespan of Weber's Cognitive Innovations

Discussing the intellectual heritage of the classics in the first chapter of his book *Ethnicity Counts*, William Petersen states that pioneers such as Vilfredo Pareto, Karl Marx, and Max Weber “had little to say on the subject” of ethnicity (1997: 11). I disagree. Max Weber did not write extensively on ethnicity but he certainly offered eight decades ago, what thus far is the best analytical framework to study ethnicity. Weber outlined a thorough research agenda for the analysis of ethnicity from the perspective of the “conditions and effects” of social action:

All in all, the notion of “ethnically” determined social action subsumes phenomena that a rigorous sociological analysis –as we do not attempt here— would have to distinguish carefully: the actual subjective effect of those customs conditioned by heredity and those determined by tradition; the differential impact of the varying content of custom; the influence of common language, religion and political action, past and present, upon the formation of customs; the extent to which such factors create attraction or repulsion, and especially the belief in affinity or disaffinity of blood; the consequences of this belief for social action in general, and specifically for action on the basis of shared custom or blood relationship, for diverse sexual relations, etc – all of this would have to be studied in detail (Weber, 1978: 394-395).

Weber’s research agenda is precise and comprehensive except that he was mistaken in his prediction of the abandoning of “the collective term *ethnic*” as he believed “it is unsuitable for a really rigorous analysis” (1978: 395). From the vantage point of the third millennium, we can easily appreciate that social differentiation along ethnic and religious lines is becoming more rather than less pronounced. The four-volume collection of sociological articles on race and ethnicity by Goulbourne (2001) is an indication of the increasing significance of this phenomenon. It is high time to pursue with vigor the analysis of ethnically determined social action and put Weber’s framework to the test.

Weber addresses sociology as a science with the task of attempting “the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (1964 [1947]:88).¹ Two of his main

¹ Weber defines ‘action’ as “all human behaviour when and in so far as the social actor attaches a subjective meaning to it”; and action “is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the social actor (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and it is thereby oriented in its course” (1964:88). He explains that social action “includes both failure to act and passive acquiescence, may be oriented to the past, present, or expected future behaviour of others ... The ‘others’ may be individual persons ... or may constitute an indefinite plurality and may be entirely unknown as individuals” (Weber, 1978:22).

concepts are particularly relevant to this discussion. These concepts are *consciousness of kind*, and *ethnic honour* (Weber, 1978: 4-5; 385-398; 1964:98). These concepts are the most significant of Weber's contributions to our understanding of the intensification of ethnic differentiation. As indicated earlier, at the most elementary level, the unit of analysis in the discussion of action is the individual social actor. I will focus on that type of *action* and *social action* that involves directly or indirectly a *consciousness of kind*. That is to say, this discussion will be limited to the realm of ethnicity, a sphere of action circumscribed by boundaries of subjectively perceived inclusion or exclusion. More specifically, in reference to Weber's research agenda I will explore three related questions: (1) How does an individual develop a consciousness of kind, that is, a "belief in a common ethnicity"? (2) How does a consciousness of kind or sense of ethnic/religious identity affect the individual's action and social (communicative) action? And (3), how does his/her sense of identity (consciousness of kind) intensify or weaken over time? This attempt to analyze ethnicity at the level of action and social action² will be illustrated with examples from health and family behaviour. But a few additional points on the concept of ethnicity are required before engaging with these three research questions.

The study of ethnicity as culture has a long and illustrious history. In their comprehensive study on the concept of culture, A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) scrutinized critically the history of the concept from the first definition by E. B. Tylor in 1871 which "seems not to have been followed by any other for thirty-two years" to 1952 (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 149). They declared in their concluding chapter "as yet we have no full theory of culture" but they did arrive at a definition based on their critical review of previous work. This is their definition of culture: "the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historical derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action" (1952: 181). Their focus on *action* is notable as it places their definition conceptually close to Max Weber's fundamental subject of study.³

² Campbell (1996:145) argues that Weber's 'social action' actually refers to '*communicative action*' which Campbell defines as "symbolic expressive actions which have been designed specifically to convey meaning from one individual to another" (1996:115). Although there are some fine distinctions between Weber's and Campbell's definitions (including the reference to the 'other' that for Weber could be an individual or a collectivity), they are essentially the same for the purpose of this discussion.

³ Max Weber's influence appears to have reached Kroeber and Kluckhohn indirectly through his brother, Alfred Weber, from whom four papers on culture are cited. There are no citations of Max Weber but we know that the two Weber brothers collaborated intellectually (Weber, 1988:329, 367, 415).

Some scholars criticize contemporary studies where Weber's comprehensive definition of ethnicity has been replaced by a multiplicity of ambiguous and thus imprecise definitions (Cornell and Hartman, 2001: 78-79). This problem of vagueness of the construct is one of four main obstacles on the way of innovations in the analysis of ethnicity. The other three main obstacles are the melting pot concept, political correctness, and the use of ethnicity as a given explanatory variable.

2.1. Vagueness of the construct

Although culture and ethnicity are two of the most discussed and scrutinized concepts in the social sciences and the influence of Max Weber is apparent in contemporary scholarly discourse on *culture*, consensus on their meaning and measurement is still elusive. Culture is often used as synonymous with ethnicity and encompassing religious beliefs as "it provides rules of social action" and guides "a way of life" (Outhwaite and Bottomore, 1994: 129-132) but these terms are ambiguous. Khademian (2002: 88-91) suggests that the lack of agreement results from the three-level nature of the concept: culture as material artifacts, symbols and communication patterns; culture as values, beliefs, attitudes and ideology; and culture as the core of "basic assumptions" about oneself and others. Khademian argues that researchers may not agree on this classification or on which of the three levels is the most important. King (1962) appears to have resolved the problem earlier by following Weber and defining ethnic group as encompassing three levels of culture. According to King (1962: 79), what constitutes an ethnic group is the combination of "common backgrounds in language, customs, beliefs, habits, and traditions, frequently of racial stock or country of origin" and more importantly, "a consciousness of kind." While Khademian's (2002) first two levels of culture are, of course, important, the third level, the core of basic assumptions about oneself and others, is the closest to King's definition and particularly to Weber's idea of a *consciousness of kind*. Reviewing the definitions of culture and ethnicity used in American family sociology, Aponte (1999: 112) reports the usual inconsistency of specific definitions of ethnicity involving culture, race, customs, place of origin, and religion among other factors; but he stresses that "the central defining feature of an ethnic group" for family researchers is "that the so designated group recognizes itself as such and is so recognized by others". These requirements of self-recognition and recognition by others approximate Weber's idea of a consciousness of kind.

2.2 The melting pot assumption

As discussed earlier, Weber incorporated culture and cultural traits into the definition of ethnic group in the form of customs, language, and styles of life

(1978:387-390). In Weber's terms, ethnicity encompasses culture but has a deeper meaning for the individual as it nurtures his/her consciousness of kind. The latter is evident through close observation of social actors in a wide variety of social interactions and situations of rapid and uncertain social change. Immigrants, for whom daily life in their host country requires adaptation, are a good example of the resilience of a *consciousness of kind*. The person strives towards permanency and stability by holding on to his or her sense of identity or ethnic roots, a reminder of who he/she is, the threads of home to weave comfort and security, however ephemeral such attempt might seem to others. However, proponents of the melting pot⁴ or ethnic assimilation thesis ignored the social actor's inclination towards permanency and stability in ethnic identity.

Thompson (1989: 2) calls the melting pot thesis "assimilationism", an American "paradigm" of the 1950s and 1960s that was the result of "a colossal misreading of Robert Park's pioneering work". William Petersen offers a different interpretation. According to him, both Park and Gunnar Myrdal agreed with the prediction that ethnic divisions would soon vanish in the United States (Petersen, 1997: 15). It appears that there are fewer proponents of the ethnic assimilation or melting pot thesis today although some analysts like Petersen see a theoretical vacuum. He believes "nothing has risen to take the place of the melting pot" (1997: 29). The expectation that ethnic minorities eventually blend or are absorbed by ethnic majorities in modern societies is, seemingly, too attractive to abandon. Assimilation of minorities represents for that thesis' proponents the success of the larger society's march towards one national identity. But the persistence and increase of ethnic differentiation is persuading more researchers of the erroneousness of the melting pot thesis.

2.3 Political correctness

Political correctness refers to the position on ethnic—and to a lesser extent religious—research that proscribes scrutiny and investigation while expecting researchers to suspend analysis and simply "bear witness for the natives" (Kuper, 2001: 36). I suggest that the sluggish progress in the contemporary conceptual analysis of ethnicity is due mostly to the emotive nature of the concept, a problem already recognized by Weber (1978: 395). The aftermath of the Second World War saw efforts of scholars to distance themselves from the serious investigation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict. Then came the tidal wave of political correctness that originated in the United States and swept through the Americas and Europe in the 1970s

⁴ "*The Melting Pot*" is the title of a play written in 1921 by Israel Zangwill. The play "proclaimed the doctrine that in new land all European stocks would blend into a nobler American compound" (Petersen, 1997:14).

becoming stronger in the 1980s and 1990s. Researchers wearing the straightjacket of political correctness find themselves unable (or unwilling) to examine the phenomena of ethnic and religious differentiation thoroughly in a manner akin to Weber's methodological agenda. That agenda involves three stages: description of the phenomenon under investigation; formulation of "generalized theoretical categories"; and the systematic comparison of the described phenomena with the theoretical formulations (Weber, 1964: 10-11). The recent revival of interest in ethnicity has been propelled mostly by the world events demonstrating an increase in ethnic conflict (Gonzalez and McCommon, 1989; Naimark, 2001).

2.4. Use of Ethnicity as a Given Explanatory Variable

The fourth main reason for the slow progress in the analysis of ethnicity is that, with notable exceptions (see for example Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Jiobu, 1988), the nature of ethnicity is seldom investigated in terms of its influence upon the individual's action or at the level of social relationships. Instead, ethnicity is normally used as a given contextual or explanatory factor in the analysis of other social phenomena. This approach is common in studies of social problems (Smelser, Wilson and Mitchell, 2000), analyses of culture and organizations (Trice and Beyer, 1993), group conflict (Prentice and Miller, 1999), political organizations and behaviour (Woshinsky, 1995; Rosel, 1995; Connor, 1994; Spinner, 1994; Brown, 1993; Gurr, 2000); economic structures and behaviour (Sowell, 1983; Harrison, 1992); and globalization and social change (Skelton and Allen, 1999; Mayo, 2000), to name but a few research areas. While the variable ethnicity is frequently included in sociological studies, it is seldom the focus of analysis as the spotlight is typically on other social phenomena. Only recently has ethnicity captured the close attention it deserves from social scientists.

3. Developing a *Consciousness of Kind* and *Ethnic Honour*

Weber defines ethnic groups as "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation" (1978: 389). The product or consequence of the subjective perception of external or 'conspicuous' differences may range from the negative outcome of "repulsion and contempt" of those perceived as different,

to the positive outcome of developing “a consciousness of kind, which may become easily the bearer of group relationships” and “sustain a specific sense of honor or dignity in their practitioners” typically “not shared by outsiders, that is, the sense of *ethnic honor*” (1978: 387-390).

In studies on ethnicity, a great deal of attention has been paid to structure but it is essential to pursue the analysis of agency. We must go back to the social actor to trace the formation of a consciousness of kind from its beginning. Thus my first research question is: How does an individual develop a consciousness of kind that is, that subjective “belief in a common ethnicity” or ethnic identity? In his critical analysis of ethnicity theories, Thompson (1989) focused on five theories that, in his view, were “the basis of most of the work being written in the field of race and ethnic relations” (1989:6). These theories are: sociobiology, “primordialist conceptions of ethnicity”, assimilation, Marxism, and world-system theory. He concluded that these theories merely describe but do not explain “the social and cultural conditions” that lead to ethnic stratification and the formation of ethnic identity, although all of them agree that ethnic equality is good and that ethnic and racial inequality “ought to be eliminated” (1989: 179).

The situation presented by Thompson in 1989 has not changed substantially over the past decade (Rupesinghe and Tishkov, 1996; Petersen, 1997; Camic and Gross, 1998) and thus Weber’s explanation remains unsurpassed. Weber suggests that a consciousness of kind begins with the subjective perception of similarities with others, similarities that are meaningful to the social actor. I believe that although it is possible for the individual to perceive similarities and differences instinctively, perhaps a more substantial notion is that a consciousness of kind and sense of ethnic honour may also be induced or prompted by the actions of others as I discuss later. A close examination of the manner in which the latter process takes place and of the characteristics of the social actors involved would provide valuable insights into the patterns of formation of a consciousness of kind and the corresponding sense of ethnic honour.

4. Ethnic Identity and Social Action

The second research question is: How does a *consciousness of kind* affect the individual's conduct? This question addresses the possible influence of ethnic identity on social action. Ethnic identity is a phenomenon of great interest to all social sciences but especially to sociology and psychology. Weber’s conceptual analysis in sociology gave rise to the formulation of his constructs consciousness of kind and ethnic honour. In contrast, the conceptualization of ethnic identity in psychology was strongly influenced by empirical

experiments on playmate and doll preferences of children, conducted by American psychologists Mamie and Kenneth Clark and published in the late 1930s. The Clarks' experiments led them to the "self-hatred thesis" portraying a negative attitude of Black Americans towards their own ethnic community (Harris, 1995). The self-hatred thesis was debunked by the Civil Rights movement and related social changes of the 1960s, a period when "a rich African-American identity was rediscovered" and the critical evaluation of the Clarks' studies was initiated (Harris, 1995: 5). In labeling this process a *rediscovery*, Harris alludes to the renowned 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois portraying dramatically the American Blacks' struggle for self-identity as an ethnic minority (Harris, 1995: 2-3). Erik Erikson (1968) proposed a dynamic process of identity formation in adolescence from "diffused" to "achieved identity". Harris (1995: 6-7) considers Erikson's conceptual framework "the most influential" work in the psychological study of identity development as it provides the groundwork for the analysis of ethnic identity.

Most importantly for the present discussion are Harris' three main related conclusions from his conceptual overview of the contributions of psychology. *First*, despite the large number of psychology studies that have been conducted on ethnic identity, this phenomenon is still poorly understood. *Second*, historical and social forces affect the individual's ethnic identity. *Third*, while psychologists have made important contributions, a multidisciplinary approach is needed to obtain a better understanding of ethnic identity formation (1995: 7-13).

4.1 The Sociological Perspective

This brings us back to sociology and Weber's work. Weber asserts that "Ethnic membership (*Gemeinsamkeit*) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action, like the latter" but "ethnic membership facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere" (Weber, 1978: 389). We may assume that a *consciousness of kind* and *sense of ethnic honour* necessarily guide or motivate the social actor's conduct along a continuum between two extremes. One extreme is the repudiation and avoidance of outsiders (those 'others' perceived as different); the other is the embracing of and affiliation with insiders (those perceived as being of one's own kind).

The central idea here is *motive*. Weber defines *motive* as "a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer as adequate ground for the conduct in question" (1964: 98-99). These extreme motives of repudiation or embracement may not become overt action in most everyday life social encounters. Still, it is reasonable to assume based on a large body of research findings on ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985; Naimark, 2001), on societies' confrontation with ethnic differentiation (Lipset, 1990:

172-192), on political struggles of ethnic minorities (Gonzalez and McCommon, 1989; Merelman, 1995; Hannum, 1996), and on the process of immigrants' adaptation into their host communities (Rumbaut and Portes, 2001a), that there is a high possibility of segregation and overt conflict between individual actors and groups gripped by extreme feelings of repudiation and embracement. The same applies to situations where *consciousness of kind* refers to religious affiliation and to a sense of religious honour.

On the other hand, it must be recognized that the reverse process is just as likely. Personal and group ethnic identity (a conscious of kind) may be awakened or augmented when people experience segregation or antagonism. Gonzales (1989) reported this common finding from a series of case studies of conflict and "expression of ethnicity" among immigrants in Lebanon, Nicaragua and Guatemala, Mayan refugees in Florida, guest workers in West Berlin, Christian Palestinians in Honduras, and refugees in Belize. Gonzales wrote "a primary conclusion that can be drawn [from all these studies] is that the *definition* of both self and group in ethnic terms is enhanced, if not actually generated, by the conflict/migration/conflict situations in which the subjects ... have found themselves" (1989: 2). My own observations of ethnic communities and immigrants in Asia and in North and South America corroborate Gonzalez' findings.

Weber stresses the collective nature of *ethnic honour*.⁵ This concept of *ethnic honour* is particularly compelling in the light of world events in the third millennium and of the experienced crescendo in the ethnic concerto playing around the globe over the past two decades. Similarly, war and destruction are not unusual social consequences of a collective perception of a threat to the community of chosen people. However, it is reasonable to assume that ethnic honour is first and foremost the social actor's belief and, therefore, is manifested in his/her *action* (as subjective meaning that the individual attaches to his/her behaviour) and in his/her *social action* (the social actor takes into account the behaviour of others and addresses his/her behaviour towards others).

It follows, then, that the stronger the social actor's sense of ethnic honour, the more inclined he/she is to sharpen or heighten the perceived differences with outsiders and the more discriminating he/she is in establishing, maintaining or terminating social interaction with others. This ethnic honour in being part of the 'chosen people' is analogous to the belief in being 'chosen' or 'blessed' found in religious communities. The correspondent

⁵ Weber emphasizes that "the ethnic honor is a specific honor of the masses (*Massenehre*) for it is accessible to anybody who belongs to the subjectively believed community of descent" which includes "somehow naturally the notion of the 'chosen people' which is merely the counterpart of status differentiation" but, "in contrast to status differentiation ... it can be claimed to an equal degree by any and every member of the mutually despising groups" (1978:391).

manifestation of this perceived honour through the social actor's conduct follows that of ethnic honour in motivating individuals and groups to draw clear distinctions between "us" ('the chosen ones') and "them" (others). A related aspect of ethnic honour is that it prepares the group to negotiate its social status vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in society as demonstrated by comparative analyses of ethnic conflict in various countries (Durham, 1989; Hannum, 1996). When this negotiation is initiated the ethnic group moves into the realm of power as a *political community* as will be discussed later.

4.2 Illustrations from Health Behaviour

The influence of ethnic identity and ethnic honour upon action and social action may be illustrated by studies on health behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, and the utilization of healing options and resources (Pearson, 2001; Cockerham, 2000; Quah, 2001). A few illustrations will suffice. Concerning the use of healing options and resources, one important aspect of analysis are perceived barriers to access. There are three main possible barriers. The two most evident are the cost of a healing service in terms of money and time; and the level of information people need to have on the service (what it is, where it is, and how can it be obtained or used). The third barrier is *perceived accessibility*. This is a more subtle but also a more difficult barrier to overcome. I defined *perceived accessibility* as the person's subjective interpretation of (a) the difficulty or ease with which he or she can obtain a given health service (whether it is preventive or curative); and (b) of the relevance of the service or information to his/her personal needs. Perceived accessibility may or may not correspond to actual accessibility of healing services such as financial cost or distance from home. The social actor's sense of ethnic or religious membership and *ethnic honour* that circumscribe his/her social circles, as Weber indicates, influence his/her perceived accessibility to different types of healers and healing options.

For example, members of religious or ethnic groups that are strictly vegetarian or that forbid the consumption of pork would refuse to take even the most needed medications or remedies if they contain animal (or pig) substances. Related examples are the Malay Muslim communities' emphasis on taking only *halal* food or Jewish communities prescribing *kosher* food. The perceived danger of *contamination* leads to avoidance of contact and sharpens the sense of difference between insiders and outsiders. Moreover, the social actor's subjective interpretation of his or health risks and his or her subjective interpretation of disease (as manifested in bodily changes), are affected by values and beliefs rooted in his/her ethnic and or religious identity. The latter often supersedes the influence of other factors such his/her level of education, age and gender (Quah, 1989, 2001).

Nevertheless, if the social actor's ethnic or religious identity and ethnic honour are not extreme (that is, are not unconditional embracing of one's

own and complete rejection of outsiders) he/she may be inclined to *borrow* solutions to his/her health problem or need from 'outsiders'. This mode of action and corresponding social action may be called *pragmatic acculturation* and it refers to the process of culture *borrowing* (borrowing ways of thinking or ways of doing things) motivated by the desire to satisfy specific needs. In the realm of health and illness, pragmatic acculturation is manifested when people make use of or *borrow* resources from cultures outside their own to satisfy specific health needs without embracing or assimilating other aspects of those cultures (Quah, 1989: 5-8, 181-182). A typical example of pragmatic acculturation is the practice self-medication with a combination of modern medicines and traditional remedies from other ethnic groups. Other things being equal, new methods or methods used by other ethnic communities to prevent or combat a disease are more likely to find acceptance in a community with a tendency towards pragmatic acculturation. But health care innovations may face more resistance in communities that are not inclined to *culture borrowing*, communities with an acute sense of *ethnic honour* and *consciousness of kind*.

Pragmatic acculturation is closely associated with perceived accessibility. A person's borrowing of other culture's *solutions* to a problem is guided by his/her subjective perception of how accessible those other methods are. As the subjective interpretation of access to and relevance of health services, health information and health advice, *perceived accessibility* is intrinsically shaped by the person's ethnic membership and religious values and beliefs as well as his/her educational level. For example, a person may decline free or low-cost services offered near his/her home, or he/she may ignore or even feel offended by a preventive health message, if he/she believes that the service or the message is culturally *unsuitable* or does not fit his/her religious sensitiveness, or is meant for people of a *different* kind.

An illustration of this effect of perceived accessibility is the distinct response of Singapore's various ethnic and religious communities to an AIDS prevention television message that formed part of a public health education campaign. While many people found the TV message appropriate and educational, members of the Muslim community found it offensive and, at their request, the public health advertisement was discontinued (Quah, 1998a). Other illustrations of the influence of ethnic identity on health-related behavior and perceived accessibility are Lyttleton's (1993) study of AIDS in Thailand; studies on the variation in the perceived need for child psychiatric clinics in Vietnam by McKelvy, Sang and Tu (1997); and the way a group of elderly Korean immigrants to the United States deal with depression (Pang, 1998).

5. Variations in Ethnic Identity over Time

The third research question is: How does the social actor's *consciousness of kind* intensify or weaken over time? Of the numerous factors that may influence the strength of the social actor's consciousness of kind, these two sets of factors are perhaps the most significant: *communal relationships* and the *political community* on the one hand, and the social actor's biographical maturation and family influence on the other hand. These factors require some attention.

5.1 Changing nature of communal relationships

Other factors being equal, and following the argument on ethnic honour, we may assume that the tendency of the social actor to heighten the perceived differences with outsiders is reinforced through "communal relationships" which are characterized by emotive feelings of belonging to the group (Weber, 1978: 40).⁶ We may infer that both the social actor's consciousness of kind and sense of ethnic honour strengthen or weaken to the extent that he/she is involved in communal relationships. The implication of this is that communal relationships take place mostly or only through direct contact or face-to-face interaction of the members with one another. One significant aspect that has changed since Weber's time is that physical proximity is no longer a requirement for the sustaining of communal relationships. In the technology-driven communication networks of the twenty-first century, dyad relationships and social networks of many kinds can be initiated, sustained and terminated across 'virtual' spaces and large physical distances.

Nevertheless, dyad and communal relationships do become stronger through sustained face-to-face interactions. The social actor is more likely to be involved in communal relationships when he/she shares the same space with other members of his/her ethnic community. However, while communal relationships are strengthened through physical proximity, that latter also increases competition for livelihood resources and thus poses a serious challenge to ethnic harmony (positive and peaceful relations among different ethnic groups). It is possible for different ethnic groups living in close proximity to each other to accept the others' presence and even, as Weber suggests, imitate their neighbors (1978: 394). Yet, evidence from research on ethnic conflict (Gonzalez and McCommon, 1989; Ryan, 1995: 77-79; Prentice and Miller, 1999) indicates that the opposite is more likely. Indeed, the potential for ethnic or religious conflict is likely to increase with close physical proximity of ethnic or religious groups that regard each other as

⁶ Weber defines "social relationship" as "the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms" (1978:26). A social relationship is "communal if and in so far as the orientation of social action ... is based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together" (1978:40).

outsiders. Conflict potential is there even if these groups are part of a nation-state or of a larger *ruling organization* that is, an organization whose members “are subjected to domination by virtue of the established order” (Weber, 1978: 53).

The role of the *political community* is a related and important influence on the strength of *consciousness of kind* as Weber (1978:389) proposes.⁷ The influence of political action is indeed evident today in the mobilization of groups and communities around ethnic or religious honour, for example through the interpretation of actions of others, events or social situations, as affronting the social actor’s ethnic or religious dignity. From a macro-perspective, a country undergoing socio-political change typically faces challenges to the legitimacy of structures and contesting demands from competing groups including the “ethnicization of politics”, that is, “exclusion on an ascriptive basis” (Imhof, 1997: 58-59) which compels ethnic groups to enter the struggle for political and economic participation (Hannum, 1996: 287-288).

5.2 Biographical and Intergenerational Changes

Sociological research routinely documents the significant influence of ethnicity and religion on family life and family structure. Ethnic and religious differences are found in a variety of family life aspects such as marital satisfaction, parenting, value transmission and family functioning. For example, ethnicity directly and indirectly permeates parents' approaches to child socialization and parental approaches differ across ethnic groups and religious affiliations (Bahr, 1991; Broderick, 1993; Bodman and Peterson, 1995; Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff, 2000; Peterson and Hann, 1999; Quah, 1998b, 1999). Comparative studies on family structure and family interaction typically reiterate the presence of significant variations across religious groups (Jenkins, 1991; Marciano, 1987; Wittberg, 1999) and ethnic groups (Wilkinson, 1987; Dilworth-Anderson, Burton and Johnson, 1993; Aponte et al, 1999; Settles, 2000).

Unfortunately, the most prevalent approach to the analysis of ethnicity and religion in family sociology is the straightforward comparison of families in different ethnic groups and religious affiliations following the study subjects’ self-identification as members of a given ethnic (or religious) group. Self-identification is the correct approach but most if not all studies neglect to go beyond simple group membership. This is indicative of the fourth obstacle to innovation in the study of ethnicity discussed earlier. It is crucial to ascertain the influence of family and child socialization on the social actor's consciousness of kind, ethnic honour or religious honour.

⁷ Weber (1978:389) stresses “it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity.”

Methodologically, there is no substitute for personal interviews to ascertain these phenomena although there are critical problems with the collection of data on ethnic groups' experiences and perceptions mainly because of "the diversity of ethnic situations" and the wide array of ways in which "this diversity can be conceptualized" (Ragin and Hein, 1993: 255).

Introducing their edited volume on *Children's Ethnic Socialization*, Rotheram and Phinney (1987:11) defined "ethnic socialization" as "the developmental process by which children acquire the behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of an ethnic group, and come to see themselves and others as members of such groups." More to the point, these authors propose that in the course of their biographical transition from childhood to adolescence, children "may become aware of options" in ethnic identity and may even become "bicultural" or "multicultural" (1987: 24). The first idea of options is consistent with Erikson's (1968) psychology framework of changing identities. But concerning the second idea, although it is expected that the adolescent would be inclined to opt for a multiplicity of choices (on many aspects of life, not just ethnic identity), simultaneously, in his or her search for solid ground during the process of maturation, this uncertainty is typically transitory. Significantly, the child is not isolated. It is important to consider the role of parents, other family members at home, school and peers, among the multiple forces that influence young people's sense of identity. The strong influence of parents and grandparents in the nurturing of a consciousness of kind in their children is well documented (Greenfield and Cocking, 1994; Quah, 1998b).

Research conducted in the 1990s was characterized by critical calls for more studies on families of ethnic minorities (Doherty et al., 1993: 15) but no significant conceptual innovations have been forthcoming. One of the problems encountered in family studies is with the definition of ethnicity. It is common for researchers to accept the individuals' self-identification as members of a given ethnic group. But some researchers may impose their own meaning of ethnicity upon the analysis of their data. In their study of parenting roles and approaches, Peterson and Hann (1999) follow Broderick (1993) and Bodman and Peterson (1995) in focusing on the "ethnic-minority context". Their understanding of the dynamics of ethnic influences is basically accurate: "Children who are members of ethnic groups are exposed to the particular group's shared identity, common ancestry and common life style that shape different conceptions of competent parenting and social competence in children" (Peterson and Hann, 1999: 357). However, their perspective is limited in two respects. *First*, it assumes wrongly that only "ethnic minorities" transmit to their children their shared identity. A *consciousness of kind* and a sense of *ethnic honour* are characteristics of the social actor as well as intrinsic features of every community, irrespective of their size relative to the other communities within the same nation-state. *Secondly*, their perspective only addresses the socially constructed dichotomy of a White majority versus non-White or *ethnic minorities* in the United

States. This culture bias is apparently based on the *melting pot* assumption leading to the assumed “fading of ethnic identities” (Rumbaut and Portes, 2001b:4).

The focus on ethnic *minorities* constitutes a serious drawback of American family and ethnicity studies. Dilworth-Anderson and her colleagues (1993) applied their analysis of theoretical approaches on ethnicity to “ethnic minority families”, in particular, Blacks and Native Americans and contrasted them to “mainstream American white families”. This classification follows assumed blood affinity and consequently bypasses or downgrades the relevance of *ethnicity* as it did not investigate the presence and impact of a consciousness of kind and ethnic honour. Had they done this, they might have identified more ethnic communities than the two loose categories they set out to study.

As discussed earlier, a more effective understanding of the role of ethnicity is obtained by using ethnic identity or, in Weber’s terms, “a consciousness of kind” and “ethnic honour”. A consciousness of kind is a pervasive individual characteristic or attribute that shapes a person’s self-identity and his/her subjective perception of the world, in the same way that gender identity or religious affiliation do. The influence of a consciousness of kind and ethnic honour is particularly evident in the selection of marriage partner and in parenting approaches. For example, among the Chinese, the characteristics of the ideal marriage partner tend to include similarities in key attributes one of which is ethnicity as it is believed that marital happiness is more likely in *mendang hudui* marriages that is, marriages that link families of equal status (Dai, 1990). In ancient times, the principle of *mendang hudui* addressed internal class divisions and differences in dialect and region of origin, village or clan within China. The contemporary meaning, however, is oriented more towards discouraging differences in ethnicity and/or religious affiliation between potential marriage partners. Similarly, studies in Singapore demonstrate the prominence of parental duty in transmitting to the young a strong sense of pride in their community—ethnic and religious honour—and an awareness of what it means to be a member of the community (Quah, 1999).

The preceding arguments on ethnic and religious identity by no means preclude the possibility of individuals (and families) changing or modifying their ethnic identities across time within the same generation and/or across generations. Sociological research on families (Rotheram and Phinney, 1987; Quah, 1998b; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001a) provide interesting illustrations of the process of family value transmission and value transformation across generations that lead to the change or modification in the social actor’s ethnic identity and religious conversion.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to investigate how much have we advanced since Weber's work in our understanding of ethnicity. Or, put differently, to explore whether there are conceptually rigorous and comprehensive analyses of ethnicity in the contemporary body of sociological literature that would provide innovative answers to the questions: What is ethnicity? And how does ethnicity affect the individual's social action? I began with a word on cognitive innovations and proceeded with the identification of four main obstacles to the conceptual advance in our understanding of ethnicity. These obstacles are: (a) the vagueness of the construct; (b) the melting pot assumption; (c) a preference for discourse on culture sidestepping ethnicity as a politically incorrect area of sociological investigation; and (d) the tendency to use ethnicity as a given explanatory variable that requires no scrutiny. Three main research questions guided the core of this analysis: (1) how does the social actor develop a consciousness of kind or ethnic identity?; (2) how does a consciousness of kind affect the individual's social action?; and (3) how does the social actor's ethnic identity intensifies or weakens over time?

The preceding discussion indicates that no significant cognitive innovations are discernable in the sociological study of ethnicity after Max Weber's contribution. This should not be surprising. In his 1987 essay on the centrality of classics, Jeffrey Alexander stated, "fifty years after Weber's death, neither Weber's sociological theories nor his assertions about science had actually been surpassed" (1987: 13). Weber explains clearly the processes of social differentiation and his work remains the most elucidating analysis of action to date (Pye, 2000).

Thus, I argue in this paper that it is useful to return to Weber's essential concepts, keeping in mind Collin Campbell's (1996) detailed critique of subsequent work on social action. Focusing on Weber's conceptual contribution as the best conceptual approach we have in sociology today for the understanding of social action, I have contended that sociologists have not added significantly to the Weberian legacy although there have been notable attempts along the way (Parsons, 1949; Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Merton, 1963; Coleman, 1990; Giddens, 1993) and enlightening critical analyses of the entire discipline—the most relevant being Ritzer's (1975) and Campbell's (1996).

Naturally, my call for a return to Weberian conceptualization as the most effective analysis of ethnic and religious differentiation will have its critics. Even Colin Campbell's excellent and comprehensive appeal for a return to Weber's action theory in his meticulously documented and very well argued book *The Myth of Social Action* (1996) was received with caution by some analysts. In his review of the book, Denzin (1997) suggested that the work of interpretive social scientists over the past decades is valuable and should not be dismissed. Similarly, Delanty (1999) sees Campbell's call for a return to

the Weberian legacy as restricting given more contemporary work such as that of Alain Touraine (1965) and Pierre Bourdieu (1988), among others.

The call for a return to the Weberian legacy is not due to the scarcity of theories. Theorists abound. But I concur with Campbell's disappointment with "the beliefs of my fellow sociologists and ... their strange abandonment of ... central figures of the interpretive action tradition" (1996: 3). Weber's intellectual legacy has been 'kicked upstairs', consigned to the pantheon of the classics, and quoted occasionally to add a touch of sophistication to one's discussion. This is not the role that Weber envisaged for his work. His contribution to the understanding of action requires critical application and testing.

Consequently, I propose that the type of innovation needed in the sociological analysis of 'ethnic' and 'religious' action is innovation in analytical approach in two ways. *First*, by going back to the fundamentals: Weber's research agenda that is, as Campbell (1996: 69) puts it, the "interpretive-cum-explanatory account" of human conduct. *Second*, by examining critically and in an impartial fashion (devoid of political correctness) the contributions of interpretative sociology and other sociological frameworks proposed over the course of the twentieth century. To this end, I have identified and examined the answers provided in Weber's writings to three main questions on ethnic identity and I have illustrated the absence of subsequent innovation with examples from contemporary research.

This paper is, in sum, an appeal to sociologists to make full use of the conceptual legacy from the classics rather than to take their conceptual gifts and merely change their wrapping (using them under different labels) or, worst still, put them away in the attic. Weber's legacy in this sense should not be defined as 'classic' if that means what Jeffrey Alexander proposes: "earlier works of human exploration that are given a privileged status" that is, "that, in the day-to-day work of the average practitioner, this deference is accorded without prior demonstration" (Alexander, 1987: 11-12). Quite the contrary, Weber's conceptual framework is useful for the advancement of sociology only if it is subjected to serious research scrutiny and testing. The same applies to any other theory and approach in sociology, irrespective of the popularity or eloquence or nationality or whatever ascribed or achieved characteristic of the authors.

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