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Identity as Theory and Method for Ethnic Studies
John T. Hatfield

The question of identity is fundamental to human life. "Who am I," as a biological and psychological being; as a member of a human group with a particular style and history; as a participant in the common human values, perceptions, and processes which transcend any particular group? Ethnic studies should have as its focus the whole human being, articulated in the biological, socio/cultural, and psycho/personal categories, and the methodology for ethnic studies should reflect the process by which people live and move within the named categories. The interaction of people who are self-consciously engaged in exploring their lives biologically, culturally, and personally, and the articulation of the boundaries at which these interactions take place, determines the scope and content of ethnic studies.

Michael Novak suggests that "the reasonable articulation, investigation, and criticism of one another's fundamental human standpoints are part of the business of becoming fully educated." His comment introduces us to the method by which human beings move from their biologically determined particularity, through cultural nurturing and identity, to personal and self-conscious transcendence.

The assumption that we live as human beings in three areas, always— biologically, socio/culturally, and psycho/personally—means that we all share some things in common because we are interbreeding members of a single species; that we have cultural identities which divide us into local groups; and that we have personalities which are capable of transcending the biological and cultural determinants. We become conscious within a human group, a culture, which determines for us how we understand ourselves prior to deliberate reflection. Our culture is our home, our roots. Robert Nisbet puts it this way:

Among all the loyalties and devotions recorded by history in Western and other civilizations, none exceeds in intensity that expressed in the words which lie richly in all the world's literature: "My people." We can, and many people in the world still do, grow-up in this

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ethnocentric world wherein our biological and cultural identities are collapsed into one another. An example of this phenomenon is to be found among American Indians, who are usually aware of two names for their tribes, one given them by other tribes—usually a derogatory term—and one by which they know themselves. The name always used to identify themselves is "human being."

The word "Indian," introduced by European explorers, forced upon the various groups of "human beings" an identity that transcended tribal affiliations. Indians have been struggling with this self-identity ever since: What does it mean to be an Indian, in addition to being biologically/culturally dineh? Indian people now of course recognize the three distinctions in their lives; Angloamericans are perhaps the last culture group to become aware of this collapse, and many still will not admit it. "Few phrases more momentous in historical terms have ever been uttered than 'Black is beautiful!' The cry serves as a paradigm for rediscovered beauty in being Chicano, Jew, Pole, French, German, Chinese, or other. Perhaps before long even Anglo-Saxon!" The recognition, the awakening of one to the difference between biological nature and cultural identity, is the first step toward self-transcendence.

The next step is recognition that, at least in the United States, we do not live in just one cultural context. We live in at least two—our local community and a national culture. We can imagine, and through imagination, realize at least a third orientation. The landing of humans on the moon has given us a new image, a global perception, of the possibilities of life. As Joseph Campbell said: "...the actual fact of the making and the visual broadcasting of that trip has transformed, deepened, and extended human consciousness to a degree and in a manner that amount to the opening of a new spiritual era." This event and its preparation struck deep responsive chords in the lives of many ethnic minorities in the United States, and it was not that so much money was spent on the space projects. Common sense does not dictate the form of new creative images but rather what Campbell calls an "infusion in the minds of blacks, Chicanos, and others—an image of the possibilities of excitement" which created the new vision of life that had been systematically denied to them.

The 1960s produced both the Civil Rights Movement and the landing of men on the moon. The Civil Rights Movement was not only a demand for social justice but an expression of a new perception of what it means to be human—a perception no longer sheltered among the intellectual elite, but shared by all people. It began, true enough, with Copernicus. His work, De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium, was indeed revolutionary. That revolution has taken 400 years to work itself into the hearts and
minds of the masses, and to find its living verification in a man's first step on the surface of the moon. In the U.S. we are in the final moments of resistance to that revolution.

John Higham suggests that racism arose out of the Copernican revolution, as an expression of resistance to change. We do not want a new way of life, so we establish rigid social boundaries to protect ourselves from change, and those boundaries are expressed as racism. Higham noted:

... modern racism is an expression and a result of the rigidification of social boundaries during a particular era of European and American history. Prior to modern times, ... the boundaries of the nation, the family, the age group, and the individual were vague. Even the concept of mankind was imprecise when monsters, angels, and legendary creatures also peopled the imagination. An immense demand for purity arose in the nineteenth century. A "Wall of Separation" grew between church and state, between Protestant and Catholic, between sinner and "teetotaler," between black and white. ... as the interdependence of an urban industrial society became increasingly evident [at the turn of the century], the purity ethic became more and more defensive. A fear of infection, sharpened by the germ theory of disease, replaced a hope of purifying the world. It was in this context that national and racial identities acquired an absolute character. After World War I, a policy of "isolationism" in foreign affairs was a culmination of a two-hundred-year trend toward cultural and social apartheid [in the United States].

Higham is confident that this country's sweeping changes of the recent past will continue.

Nathan Huggins argued that pluralism is an avoidance of the question of an American identity, that we do not yet have such an identity but we need one to avoid fragmentation and mere anarchy. He noted:

The notion of pluralism, with its dynamics of competition and cooperation, assumes that community interests will be served naturally. Like the model of laissez-faire economics, it is as if by an "invisible hand" that the collective interest will be formed out of the struggle for self-interest. But it is just the absence of a sense of larger community that has made pluralism a compelling concept. Where a sense of broad community does not exist, it becomes useful to reduce the whole to its parts. The result can seem like a collection of groups and interests grabbing whatever they can get, producing little sense of commonwealth.

In his view, we must discover what unites us as a nation—the shared experiences which form a base for making us cohesive as a people. "There is a need to share in a general community—to look in the face of a fellow who is not one's own ancestry or religion and to acknowledge shared assumptions and values, to anticipate behavior and feelings." Huggins finds such a base in the shared experience of immigration, which is common to all but the American Indians, and even there, immigration forced upon them a new concept—Indianness.

The historical commonness of this immigrant and Americanization experience—the obligation, for better or worse, of living together and sharing one another's destinies—that has shaped new [people] and will define the distinctiveness of American character and American civilization.

The commonness is true not only of European but even more so of the
black experience:

The coming of the African to America did make the African into a new man. In the old world, there were many Africans. Particularism (sic) was, and to a large extent still is, characteristic of African peoples. Tribal differences meant differences in language, religion, principal occupation, family relationship. They were not inconsequential matters. Some Africans were matrilineal, others patrilineal. Some were polygamous, others were monogamous. While most who came to America followed traditional African religions, others were Islamic. They had lived under a wide variety of social and political organizations. While we might find prevalences among the people who came, and while we may recognize a general commonality among them, they were preoccupied with the differences. They could not understand one another's language. They might find one another's customs repugnant. Yet out of this diversity there was created a single people in a much more thorough way than has occurred in the rest of American society. Ethnic pluralism was not allowed the Africans as it was the various Euro-Americans.10

If it is possible to discover commonly shared experiences transcending cultural boundaries and giving substance to the term "American," then it is equally possible to expand this process and discover the common experience of people in the Western Hemisphere, and finally in the world at large—and perhaps beyond that.

But we must be clear that such a commonly shared basis of experience is not the same as the marketplace society in which we perforce must live. That distinction is insisted upon by Michael Novak:

There are . . . two distinct cultural networks in which the people of the United States participate. The first is the national culture, serviced and maintained by national magazines, national television networks, and other national systems of distribution and coordination. The second consists of the many other . . . networks, regional, religious, ethnic, and local, down to family network and neighborhood. It is regrettable that the universities and colleges are so often perceived to be, and are, agents of the national superculture and do so little to defend, nourish, and strengthen the local networks within which most citizens actually live.11

We have hunches about the common culture's existence. The common culture is often confused with the superculture, and the reaction of many ethnic groups is as toward an adversary. Suppose we can find that common culture which both Novak and Huggins insist upon, must we then choose between that and our local culture? This is the argument between pluralism and integration, and it is finally one of personal identity. Who am I? Am I first an Italian or am I first an American or, for that matter, am I first a human being?

Perhaps one does not have to choose. Perhaps the categories are unrealistic. John Higham suggested:

The essential dilemma is the opposition between a strategy of integration and one of pluralism. Although the contrast has many dimensions, it can be summed up as a question of boundaries. The integrationist looks toward the elimination of ethnic boundaries. The pluralist believes in maintaining them. Their primary difference, therefore, concerns the scale and character of the community each takes as a model. Integration is pledged to the Great Community which is yet to be realized: the brotherhood of mankind. Pluralism holds fast to the little community: the concrete local brotherhood which is rooted in the past. Integration
in its modern form expresses the [universal nature] of the Enlightenment. Pluralism rests on the premises of romantic thought.¹²

These two points of view have contrasting understandings of the role of the individual:

The democracy of integration is an equality of individuals; pluralist democracy is an equality of groups. For the assimilationist the primary social unit and the locus of value is the individual. What counts is [the right] to self-definition. The individual must be free to secede from ... ancestors. This is exactly what happens in the process of assimilation: individuals or families detach themselves one by one from their traditional communities. For pluralists, however, the persistence and vitality of the group comes first. Individuals can realize themselves, and become whole, only through the group that nourishes their being.¹³

Put in this way, both views appear undesirable and unrealistic. "Assimilationism falsely assumes that ethnic ties dissolve fairly easily in an open society,"¹⁴ and pluralism "... assumes a rigidity of ethnic boundaries and a fixity of group commitment which American life does not permit."¹⁵ Moreover, "pluralism encourages the further illusion that ethnic groups typically have a high degree of internal solidarity."¹⁶ Finally, "whereas assimilation penalizes the less ambitious and successful groups and individuals, pluralism circumscribes the more autonomous and adventurous."¹⁷

His answer is a system which Higham calls "pluralistic integration"; that is, a combination of both views, a system in which one lives in both cultures—the local culture and the common culture of the United States (and, ultimately, the world). That such a view is objectionable to some ethnic minority groups stems from the effects of racism and the consequent adversary relationship between the ethnic culture and the "superculture." But racism has a particular history and is coming to an end. Since the time of the isolationism of the years following the First World War, "... we have witnessed what may be only the beginning of a profound shift of direction."¹⁸

That direction is, of course, the recognition of the realities opened by the Copernican revolution and symbolized by the landing of men on the moon, the possibility of multicultural life. Such a possibility should not be seen as a fascination with exotica but an affirmation of the essential nature of people—that we are both locally identified and capable of transcending that context. We may be reeds, as Blaise Pascal said, and the weakest thing in nature, but we are thinking reeds, nonetheless. To transcend oneself is fundamentally human.

How do we transcend ourselves? First, by dialogue and interaction and study; by "reasonable articulation, investigation, and criticism of one another’s fundamental human standpoints."¹⁹ And what we discover is that the more multicultural we are, the more intensely personal we become, because it is simply not possible to interact in intelligent and
emotional ways with cultures other than our own and not discover the
cultural limitations of self-identity in a vacuum. The point is to see our
cultural matrix from a new perspective. We become objective about our
own cultural value-system as we come into contact with other cultures
and other value-systems. Since we are all members of the human race, we
can discover other and enriching dimensions of being human, increasing
thereby our self-consciousness and expanding our self-identity. At the
same time, of course, we learn to recognize the specific grasp of reality
and mode of existence of other cultures, and their right to exist, equal to
our own, neither better nor worse.

The educational system must be responsive to the three dimensions of
people—their biological particularities, their ethnic and socio-cultural
matrix, and their psycho-personal transformations. The problem has
been that educational institutions, as Nisbet and Novak both suggest,
have reflected and been determined by the marketplace society, the
“superculture.” The effects of this are to alienate us from our cultural
matrix.

In a word, if ordinary people in the United States begin to lose confidence in the
cultural services provided them by America’s colleges and universities, there is
some reason for their mistrust. Not often does a young man or woman from one of
America’s many neighborhoods depart for the university and then come back
deepened, more articulate, and peacefully self-critical with respect to his or her
native neighborhood. Most often, particularly at the “better” schools, the student
is purposely, in any case intensively, “enlightened” from his or her previous
unenlightenment, sometimes embittered, almost always alienated from the home.
Is it wise or good that so many in our land “cannot go home again”? An educated
person ought not to return unchanged; but one would hope that change would be
characterized by sympathy, by a greater understanding, by an easier tolerance,
rather than by a vague and scarcely nameable hostility.

The trend should be toward a more responsive and responsible com­
mitment to local and regional groups. This trend must be encouraged, for
it is the only way members of ethnic cultures (which is all people) will
discover that we are beautiful, and that our heritage is beautiful.

The task for ethnic studies in encouraging the search for identity at all
levels is discussed in the conclusion of Habits of the Heart. After
analyzing American cultural traditions and what Robert Bellah calls the
“first language” of autonomous individualism, he pleads for a return to
tradition, community, and commitment. Only in the local, ethnic
identification with “my people” can one find authentic identity and a
foundation from which one can reach for the moon. In Bellah’s words, we
must reaffirm the “... classic role of education as a way to articulate
private affirmations with cultural meanings so that individuals simul­
taneously become more fully developed people and citizens of a free

society.” Anyone who wishes to find authentic identity must face the
paradox of being identified with a tradition, a culture, and even a
biology. Perhaps we are on the threshold of an even greater paradox: to find one's true self, one must identify with all of the globe's people.

Notes

1Michael Novak. "The One and the Many." Daedalus. (Fall, 1974) 204.


3Ibid.


5Ibid., 249.


8Ibid., 56.

9Ibid., 57.

10Ibid., 58.

11Novak, 207.

12Higham, 67-68.

13Ibid., 68.

14Ibid.

15Ibid.

16Ibid.

17Ibid.

18Ibid.

19Novak, 204.
Critique

Ethnic Studies is generally viewed as a minor program in the academy, lacking research philosophy and methodology. Consequently, scholars who attempt research concerning peoples of color focus on the "group": their social history, migration patterns, political and economic development, educational attainment, and lifestyle. Social science disciplinary guidelines are the usual framework. John Hatfield's "Identity as Theory and Method for Ethnic Studies" provides a basis for truly understanding ethnicity.

Hatfield stresses "identity" as a key for understanding the nature of the human character: That is,

The interaction of people who are self-consciously engaged in exploring their lives biologically, culturally, and personally, and the articulation of the boundaries at which these interactions take place, determines the scope and content of ethnic studies.

Hatfield emphasizes how the interrelationship of the biological, socio/cultural, psycho/personal components are crucial for ethnic studies theory and method. Although Frederik Barth emphasized the nature of ethnic group members moving across ethnic boundaries depending on their social situation,1 Hatfield's specific focus on personal identity provides a method for comprehending how "human beings move from biologically determined particularity through cultural nurturing and identity, to personal and self-conscious transcendence." By placing emphasis on identity within a program devoted to understanding the complexities associated with ethnicity and ethnic groups, Hatfield begins to explore the soul of human development and choice. Personal liberation within the context of understanding oneself in relationship to society, familial inheritance, and group alignments bridge university disciplines and broaden the scope of ethnic studies.

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20Ibid., 210.

The responsibility of ethnic studies programs is to provide a forum for dialogue and interaction as a method for enhancing and generating the self-discovery process. One does not have to give up heritage, identity, and pride to be an active participant in “the mainstream” or within the “superculture.” Through the process of dialogue and interaction, students become aware of “who they are” in relationship to society, discover how the various components of identity shape their responses and choices, and establish bridges for cross-cultural understanding.

Two autobiographies illustrate the significance of Hatfield’s article—Maxine Hong Kingston’s *A Woman Warrior* and Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory.*\(^2\) Rodriguez’s work reflects a denial of Chicano heritage and identity in order to fit into the public role of the “scholarship boy.” By suppressing his private/personal and biological self and only opting for the “white” socio/cultural mainstream, Rodriguez finds limited success and suffers from not fitting into either world. He creates and lives with the dualistic mental image that he must be in one world or the other, no choice, no alternative, and at the same time can neither recapture his “private” Mexican past nor function in “white” society.

Kingston, conversely, uses language and her bilingual voice—Chinese/English—to illustrate power and liberation through self-definition. The mythic vision of “the Woman Warrior” in Chinese folk tradition becomes Kingston’s reality as she transcends ethnic boundaries and fights for her English voice outside the Chinese family. By discovering aspects of her identity, the biological, psycho/personal (her ability to function in both worlds), and her socio/cultural component (integrating her Chinese background and her American education), she uses language, her voice, as a tool for integrating aspects of her identity. Unlike Rodriguez, Kingston bridges the cultural gaps forced by using English and going to American schools by maintaining connections through Chinese language to her Chinese heritage. By interweaving the three components of identity discussed by Hatfield, Kingston personifies liberation.

The response to “identity” is central to Kingston’s and Rodriguez’s autobiographies. The examples illustrate how identity becomes the focal point for creating a methodology and a starting point for understanding ethnicity through the eyes of the beholder rather than from an external point of view. Through personal voice and a self-defined language, personal liberation is generated. Hatfield’s theory and method focusing on identity is a powerful tool for ethnic studies where personal and cultural liberation are the goals.

—Barbara Hiura
Critique

John Hatfield's discussion of identity and ethnicity in an increasingly wider, abstract, and problematical context is an extended definition of the current dilemma. I suspect Hatfield intends to offer an essentially optimistic statement, but for many readers questions and doubts may remain, if not predominate.

For example, Hatfield's citation of Higham on the relationship between the Copernican revolution and racism reminds us that every revolution provokes reactionary impulses in the cultural and political body. Is it inevitable that the forces of revolution and transcendence will prevail? Similarly, Hatfield offers the observation that pluralism and its fragmentation of the whole and assimilation and its elimination of the parts seem unnecessarily messy and neat, respectively. Further, adversarial relationships between ethnic cultures and the "superculture" seem endemic in their interaction. But while Higham's "pluralistic integration" may be the tertium quid, history suggests that what usually "unites us as a nation" is less often Copernican vision than the intolerance of international antagonism and hostility—that is, war or our fear of it.

In fact, Hatfield makes us aware that culture-transcending shared experience—the enabling stuff of the ideal macro-culture—is presently identifiable only in negative terms; the "common culture" is a fiction that exists most concretely in terms of what it is not. We know that it is not the shared experience of "marketplace [American] society," the ubiquitous popular culture of the electronic media, big business, and government. We know it is not the "national superculture" life of higher
education in cahoots with all of these. Hatfield leaves us stuck with the question of how to move from the affirmative securities of local authenticity (South Boston or Chinatown, for example) to existence on a higher plane, envisioned but not experienced.

In specific terms: How, in fact, do we reverse the one-way current of the electronic superculture? How does transcendence emerge, given (for example) the "evil empire" rhetoric of eschatological nationalism and ideology? How do colleges and universities help generate the dialogue necessary to transcendence of local context and self? Will higher education vacate the marketplace of grantsmanship in its affirmation of the marketplace of ideas? The current trend seems in the opposite direction. Will the universities and colleges generate, implement, and promote strategies for multicultural discourse, and what academic or academy-related forms will they take? The habits of mind that the academy seems most anxious to nurture today are in fact those of the "real" (read "marketplace") world of finite satisfactions.

—Neil Nakadate

Critique

To be human is to have an identity. Indeed, it is what ethnicity is about. However, as a theoretical or methodological prescription for ethnic studies, as advocated by Hatfield, identity is inadequate even within the categories he has specified. Hatfield seems to be asking theoretical analysts to do what artists, novelists, and philosophers do best because they explore the existential and phenomenological aspects of ethnic identity in depth and usually with greater authenticity. This does not mean that there is no need for self-discovery and understanding in ethnic studies. There are equally pressing non-identity issues with which ethnic studies must also deal. Ethnic studies should be concerned with economics, for instance, with power or lack thereof. It should also be concerned with the analysis of public policies that impinge on ethnic and minority groups.

Hatfield is correct in pointing out that we do not live in one cultural context in America. As a matter of fact, very few countries in the world
are truly homogenous cultural entities. Nevertheless, this has not prevented dominant ethnic groups from trying to assimilate other groups. In America, such an attempt through Anglo-conformity has been rejected by both ethnic and racial minorities. These groups, in turn, embraced cultural pluralism with some reservation, if not ambivalence. Horace Kellen, for example, espoused cultural pluralism at the turn of the century as a means of preserving Jewish religious and cultural identity in America. He was also hopeful that a "democracy of nationalities" would emerge in America. Unfortunately, that dream has not materialized, yet.

The pluralist thesis has so much appeal to most groups largely because people take the insider's view and, therefore, tend to see pluralism in a positive light. It is partly the reason why white ethnics in the North have used it to keep out blacks from their neighborhoods while denying any racist or discriminatory intent. Blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York City also used pluralist arguments in the 1960s to gain power and control of educational institutions in their communities, but they did not exclude whites from their neighborhoods.

In spite of the fact that pluralism has been used to justify cultural and social apartheid, as Hatfield has pointed out, it still has special significance for ethnic and other minority groups who have often used it to develop and consolidate their communities. Such communities have been invaluable in providing both refuge and a sense of belonging for the alienated individuals. This is how the Black Muslims, for example, have been particularly successful in rehabilitating otherwise incorrigible criminals and drug addicts. Interestingly enough, such communities also serve the more successful members who often become staunch defenders of ethnic community boundaries. However, pluralism has no particular appeal to individuals seeking upward, social mobility. These individuals have often resorted to democratic or individualist principles to break down social barriers.

Ethnic pluralism in America is a social reality that the so-called superculture cannot erase. This is particularly true for racial minorities. On the one hand, ethnic identification for many whites is virtually a matter of choice because of intermarriage between various ethnic groups. A black person, on the other hand, cannot choose to be Irish, for example, even though he or she may actually be part Irish. This same person can, however, choose to be Ibo or Yoruba. That is why Pan-Africanism has particular appeal to Afro-americans. In a pluralistic society, not only is dialogue among groups necessary for social harmony but it must take place in an atmosphere that has tolerance for diversity.

—Jonathan A. Majak
Female Power, Ethnicity, and Aging  
Linda M. C. Abbott

The standard academic presentation on the topic of power rarely alludes to the elderly, ethnic groups, or to females of any age or race. The cultural history of humankind has been one of gross inequities in the distribution of power, and much of this distributional variance has been attributable to the categories of race, gender, and age. When these categories overlap, the impact on individual access to power has been, and continues to be, the greatest.

In order to understand the dynamics of the impact of cultural and sex-linked dimensions of power on the mid and late stages of the life cycle, the most broadly applicable bases of power must first be clearly set forth. Combining the French and Raven1 power sources with Hilary Lips'2 discussion, seven categories emerge through which individuals can hold or achieve disproportionate power or authority. These categories are examined in terms of their applicability to available female life patterns across time and culture, using examples drawn from anthropological and sociological literature.

I. Coercion. In many aspects the simplest of the power bases is that which an individual holds by means of superior physical strength or skill. Historically, this base has been exclusively a male prerogative by virtue of larger size, greater muscle mass, and fewer limitations, such as those imposed by pregnancy in females. Prior to the invention and use of weapons available to either gender, coercive power rested on simple strength. When coercive power has been exercised by females, it has been viewed as unusual and has produced fear disproportionate to the actual physical threat present. Sylvia Leith-Ross quotes the reaction of a woman to a 1929 Ibo riot in protest of the imposition of British taxation:

There were plenty too much women, a very large crowd. They were coming along the road and beating their laps and lifting their heads toward the sky and waving their sticks. All had sticks, big sticks. I was afraid of them ... they looked quite different from any other crowd of women I have ever seen ... As they had no children with them that also made me afraid. I do not know where any of women came from. I was very much afraid of them and did not look at their faces.3

II. Authority. Formal or legitimate authority, the second universal
power base, allocates the right to control resources according to principles derived from culturally shared beliefs regarding a people's origin. Globally and historically, wide variety in the distribution of authority patterns has been evident. In examining creation stories of 112 societies for gender origin symbolism, Sanday found in fifty-six cultures that a masculine figure was the source of authority, in twenty cultures, a feminine figure was most significant, and in thirty-six societies, a couple shared the creation role. Ceremonial and political roles of men and women flow from the creation myths and become routinized as legitimate authority in the culture.

In the Seneca creation story, for example, a woman, called the ancient-bodied, is responsible for most of earthly life. The Constitution of the Five Nations (including the Seneca) which was passed on orally for generations, and written in the late 19th century, codifies the central role of women: "Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother."4

More commonly, male-centered creation myths transmit authority and resource control to males. Paul's concise description of the Judeo-Christian chain of command is illustrative: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God."5 This sort of male-centered understanding of derived authority has been by far the most widespread, both across time and culture, with devastating consequences for women. In a 1978 technical development conference in Canada, a delegate from Mozambique summarized the disparity in resource control between the genders:

Women constitute one-half of the world's population and one-third of the official labor force; women perform nearly two-thirds of the hours worked; women, according to UN and ILO statistics, receive only one-tenth of the world property; women make up three-fourths of the world's undernourished; women, in the developing countries, form eighty percent of the age group six to sixteen with no schooling ... it is a fact that the hard core of the development problem is constituted by women. Women are the most unequal among unequals.6

III. Access to Specialized Information. The third power source has been unequally distributed as well. The sole exception to the male domination of learning opportunities has been the traditional healing arts, especially midwifery. The practice of that knowledge has been viewed with suspicion and fear and subjected to outright persecution. Formal educational institutions, both native and colonial, have more often than not been designed along parallel sex-segregated tracks. Male classes impart the knowledge base for leadership positions; females learn cooking and sewing. Higher education, in particular, long delayed the admission of women, and higher education institutions continue to
be administratively segregated. If knowledge is power, then access to learning determines the composition of the empowered class.

IV. Charisma. Personal magnetism, or charisma, the fourth power base, interacts with gender in a different manner than those previously discussed. Here, the interaction of age with gender determines access to power. Where maturity is generally a prerequisite for the exercise of coercive, legitimate, or intellectual power, maturity differentially affects the exercise of charismatic power by males and females. Youth of both genders may wield influence interpersonally by means of their attractiveness or sway millions through their “star” quality. With age, however, the male acquires an especially valued patina, whereas the female withers and is rejected as a symbol of attractiveness. As an available resource, power based on physical charm is exceptionally fleeting for the female.

V. Spiritual Power. Age impacts upon spiritual power in nearly the opposite way. In many religions, closeness to God is attained through the patient practice of spiritual discipline over many years. Where gender is concerned, however, spiritual power as a resource is more available to men than to women, as has been the case with the other bases of power examined. Although a few remarkable women have founded and advanced religions, in the majority of religions women are excluded from the powerful intermediary role of priest, rabbi, mullah or shaman. People who are thought to have special closeness or access to God are usually men, a circumstance related to the male image of God in Christian, Jewish, and Moslem cultures, among many others. Where women do appear to hold some supernatural power, it is likely to be attributed to a link with the devil, not with God. The connection between women’s possession of special knowledge and the accusation of witchcraft is well-documented elsewhere.\(^7\) In the 13th-17th century witchcraft craze, some eighty-five percent of those put to death for witchcraft were women.\(^8\) The three categories of crimes for which this punishment was deemed appropriate included sexual expression, being organized into groups, and rendering medical assistance through traditional healing practices. Men, by virtue of their physical similarity to Christ, were thought to be immune from these temptations and women—thought to be fickle, lustful, and weak-minded creatures—were especially vulnerable. While this explanation of women’s assertive behavior may have inspired fear and awe as well as persecution, it generally did not place them in the position of respect accorded spiritual leadership.

VI. Reward Power. The sixth source of power, the ability to reward, is a derivative of the preceding five, and extends their impact. For example an individual who controls resources, or has special access to
God, or who has superior knowledge, is in a position to share these attributes and their reflected glory with faithful friends and followers. Conversely, such an individual is empowered to withhold such favors for cause, spite, or displeasure. As a derivative, this power base follows the male-dominant pattern of each of the others, multiplying their effect and lengthening the term of their dominion.

VII. Referent Power. The final source, referent power, is based on an individual's attraction to another person or group, and may also be derivative. For instance, a person who wanted to be a doctor might adopt mannerisms, vocabulary, social style, and other behaviors observed to be typical of doctors. The strength of the identification may be explained by the informational or legitimate sources of power actually enjoyed by physicians, or the attachment may be idiosyncratic, operating independently of any reasonable explanation. Referent power, when a derivative source, is distributed differentially by gender, race, and age, following the pattern established by the primary bases of power. In general, the pattern is male dominant, but there is an important exception. Nearly all individuals admire, want to be like, and attribute power to their primary care-giver in infancy and childhood. Since this is most often the female parent, a widespread belief in the power of mother exists among children, based in large part upon her capacity to reward, which in turn stems from what appears to the child to be her control of resources. In actuality, her discretion in the distribution of resources may be extremely limited, a circumstance which becomes apparent to children later in life.

These seven power sources describe the base of disproportionate levels of influence enjoyed by individuals. Power relationships are dynamic rather than static, however, and fluctuate as cultures respond to natural disaster, war, invasion, growth or decline, disease, or technological innovation. While it is beyond the scope of this review to chart these changes, some generalizations can be outlined. Sanday's wide-ranging survey found that in those cultures with an inner, or earth-centered orientation, females were likely to have equal or higher status than males. In those cultures with an outer, animal, or sky-centered orientation, males generally enjoyed dominant status. These relationships tend to be stable until war or disaster introduce new circumstances which lead to new mythology legitimating altered power relationships. One typical pattern is that found in response to Western Colonialism. European influence universally resulted in the erosion of female status. When paired with migration which disrupted agriculture, it profoundly and permanently depressed the position of women relative to what it had been.
Several African societies, in which agriculture was women’s work and the source of women’s disposable income, experienced a similar disruptive impact of European agricultural technology. Instruction in using equipment was given exclusively to men as well, displacing the prior order and depressing the status of women by removing their access to a livelihood.

Another illustration can be drawn from Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) history in the United States. According to one interpretation, Quaker ideology espousing the importance of the nuclear family was adopted to provide legitimate status to males who had been deprived of their traditional life on the trail. However, the salvation of the Haudenosaunee male was achieved at the expense of the traditional matrifocal system, and several defiant old women were actually executed when they attempted to defend their prerogatives.

The crisis of culture called modernization has had adverse effects on many Third World peoples, but this impact has been most devastating for women through the removal of their traditional bases of power. In the economic, sociopolitical, educational, and spiritual spheres, colonial exploitation created new dependencies for women. The impact of modernization and technological innovation on women in general has been to remove that portion of their power which rested on a magico-cultural or religious base and to depress that portion of their power which rested on cultivation, consumption, and marketing of traditional crops. This experience is similar across racial groups, intensifying rather than changing in nature for women of color.

The effect of aging on the power sources available to women in cultures of varying stages of modernization is not as simple or clear. Although physical strength as a source of coercive power clearly declines with age, both expert and referent power may actually increase. An accumulating body of research supports the notion that many intellectual capacities continue to expand well into the eighties among persons who have not suffered damage from diseases which affect the brain. Referent power, which is based on liking and respect, also may increase with age simply because the majority of the elderly are women, and research has shown that women have more favorable attitudes toward women than men do. Legitimate authority and resource control diverge with age, with authority potentially remaining stable or even increasing, depending on the cultural value of age. Economic power, however, declines precipitously except for a fortunate few.

In the United States, most older women subsist on low, fixed social security incomes based on their husband’s earnings. In many rural families, the men were not covered by social security, so their widows
have no income whatsoever, except for handouts from their children or part-time earnings from babysitting or jobs as waitresses or laundry workers where their health permits such employment. Seventy-nine percent of unmarried women over sixty-five years of age fall well below the poverty level, with fifty percent of that group comprised of widows. In 1980, the average social security benefit for all women was $230 a month, far below the level required for the exercise of economic power.

The likelihood of victimization compounds the effect of poverty, particularly for women of color. Black women, at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, are “eighteen times more likely to be victims of rape than white women,” and “more affluent blacks are a great deal more likely to be victimized (burglarized) than are more affluent whites.”

Functioning additively, such victimization, the loss of economic power, and the negative cultural view of aging as it impacts the personal attractiveness of women, together with loss of such sources of self-esteem as the wife and mother roles, might lead to a prediction of widespread depression or mental status deterioration for women as they age. However, such negative results of the aging process are far from universal, even within any single ethnic group, and vary widely among such groups. Part of the reason for this variance, of course, is because “members of different ethnic groups have varying expectations of the aged. This probably [even] differs by generation and class within given ethnic groups.”

A sampling of research findings may shed some light on this diversity. Corrine Azen Krause, in a 1979 study, found a surprising level of mental health among the elderly Slavic women in her sample. She attributes this positive outlook to the combined impact of several features of Slavic culture, particularly deep religiosity and a continuing participation in home and community affairs. The Slavic woman continues to play a significant role in the extended family, fostered by proximity, and provides dedicated service to her church as long as physically able. She is protected by the maintenance of these power bases from the loss of meaningful roles so often associated with aging.

In research involving different ethnic groups, Cohler and Lieberman found nearly the opposite results from prolonged immersion in the ethnic culture. The Italian and Polish respondents reported a certain amount of stress associated with the continuing demands on their energies resulting from family and community embeddedness. Their socialization into dependent and caring roles had not permitted them as rapid a disengagement as their personal circumstances might have required.

When broader generalizations are sought regarding the impact of aging on women's power and mental health, a few suggestive findings
from research emerge. An Israeli cross-cultural study of female attitudes toward menopause explored attitudes toward femininity, psychosexual histories, menopause experiences, and family and social problems associated with age. While most findings were negative, the mixed results suggested that the subject of adjustment to aging is more complex than previously thought. For at least the Oriental-Arab subjects in this sample, a positive response to menopause was associated with the desire to have no more children.

Because of the complexity of women's responses to aging, and due to the variability both within and among ethnic groups, the most utilitarian of the research reports appear to be those that suggest strategies useful in facilitating adjustment to later life, and strategies explicitly designed to maintain several of the power bases available to women at earlier stages of the life cycle.

In a mid-eastern study of over 200 married women between the ages of forty-six and sixty-one who were college graduates, Black and Hill found that no single specific life event was associated with adjustment or lack thereof. Rather, their findings indicate the most important single factor in women's mental health was their ability to cope creatively with situations as they arise. Those who had demonstrated to their own satisfaction the ability to adapt to new situations were the most satisfied and well-adjusted. They also indicated the positive value of the women's freedom to explore new alternatives in their careers and life-styles after many of their family responsibilities had been discharged.

One strategy frequently employed among women involves tapping others in similar situations for experiential wisdom. These networks, common in most cultures, share resources and information through formal or informal mechanisms. This active involvement in networks not only is a strategy for retaining some forms of power but also serves to initiate the members to a variety of coping strategies which may be applicable to their situation. Common bonds may be formed by profession, residence area, age, or by the triple jeopardy of race, sex, and class. As a mechanism typical of females, network strategies may help forge a response to the hierarchical pattern of authority that have excluded many women from the paths to power. By opening these networks to people of both genders, an important step will be taken to break status barriers in favor of new, more permeable situation-based alliances. Such a strategy has proven its worth in the management field; perhaps it is worth attempting in applied human relations.

In summary, a review of the seven bases of power indicates that women consistently experience and exercise less power than men. Further, modernization and technological innovation have served to
depress the status of women in those limited realms where some degree of authority had been accorded by the traditional culture. In American culture, where personal worth is often equated with economic power, the condition of women as compared to men is depressed and stable, if not deteriorating.

The source of this decline in relative economic power is potentially a source of strength. Demographic changes, particularly increasing longevity, have produced a rapid rise in sheer numbers of older women. Media attention to community organizing efforts involving older women provide role models and inspiration for many. On a more superficial level, the media can be seen as an ally to older women. Several of the actresses most in demand are well over forty, an unusual and promising circumstance. Capitalizing on the novelty of legitimation for at least the charismatic form of power for the "older" woman, leaders may seek legitimation for other power bases as well.

More solid, long-range gains in equity may be derived from encouragement of women pursuing technologically-based careers in science and health fields. As the number of women approach significance in these fields, acknowledged intellectual power will be one by-product. Similarly, access for women to seminary training offers promise for increasing standing in terms of spiritual power.

The awakening of older women to their power in numbers and the training of younger women in career paths that constitute legitimate access to power are two significant strategies challenging inequity at the present time. For the vast numbers of women fitting neither category, forms of assistance must be developed and delivered which speak to their circumstance as well. Here, feminist organizations, women's studies classes, and informal discussion groups can render important services by teaching a range of coping skills and strategies. This method of empowerment, although labor-intensive, has the distinct advantage of producing immediate and significant increases in personal power for women in a variety of age, cultural, and ethnic categories, as well as in many life circumstances. Such coping skill training offers promise in addressing the pervasive and continuing inequities facing women.
Notes


5Bible. I Corinthians 11:3.


8Lips, 17.


10For a fuller discussion see: Comparative Perspective of Third World Women: The Impact of Race, Sex and Class. B. Lindsay, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1980).


12Ibid.


**Critique**

“Female Power, Ethnicity, and Aging” will surely be of interest to readers of this journal. Scholars in ethnic and women’s studies have, no doubt, considered at one time or another the impact of ethnicity and age on the power of women in our culture and have a sense of the negative influence of these factors on women who as a group have marginal status in our power structures. So it is that we are anxious to have our sense of these relationships documented in some way or to have the philosophical implications of the intersections of these factors explored and defined. This is a big order and not one that is very satisfyingly filled by Abbott’s presentation.

The typology which she uses for the discussion of sources of power seems to be derived from standard sociological description, but it is eye-opening nonetheless. Her categories will remind the reader of the varieties of power sources functioning in any culture and they will also suggest for the American reader, at least, the ways in which these power sources reinforce one another and tend to concentrate power in small groups (minorities, if you will) of people with conservative values and extensive economic resources. These people are clearly not women and they are not ethnic minorities. An examination of the power sources, such as the one provided here, is useful in pointing to the avenues by which a powerless group seeking power can endeavor to obtain it. So far, so good.

The method favored by academic sociologists for the analysis of such a multifaceted issue as the one considered here is the collection of data, usually through the use of a statistically reliable survey, and the
presentation of that information in a matrix which will accommodate the three dimensional features of the question. Another approach might be philosophical, descriptive and somewhat more anecdotal. Abbott's analysis seems to be a combination of the two. She reports on the results of surveys from the mid-east, from Slavic, Polish, and Italian cultures to provide a basis for her analysis, though little of the material she selected combines all of the factors under consideration—sex, ethnicity, and age. Primarily, however, her method is to discuss in a somewhat anecdotal manner what is already quite well-known about the powerless groups—the subtle denial of access to economic resources, specialized learning, and spiritual authority, which she sees narrowly as religious authority. Her focus is a bit too broad to provide new and refined insights into the matter.

Abbott's attempt to broaden her scope to include examples of an international character causes her some additional problems. When she selects examples from the statistical literature she introduces some confusion concerning the term "ethnicity." It is unclear whether she intended to select studies which considered these groups as the dominant culture—Slavs in Yugoslavia—or studies of these groups as minority cultures—Slavs in the United States. In some instances she seems to be interested in how various cultures treat status and power with respect to women and aging. In other instances, especially those examples involving Americans and blacks, the matter of ethnicity should be additionally qualified by ethnic minority status, a significant difference she largely ignores. The impact of technology, which seems to be taken up in an effort to expand the discussion to include third world cultures, must be interpreted quite differently in a third world context than within the ethnic variety found in the so-called first world.

Perhaps most disappointing to the reader who hopes to find in this discussion some indication of how power structures once understood can be made to work for the less powerful is the concluding section of the essay which points to ways in which equality can be achieved. Here the factor of ethnicity is abandoned in both its international dimension and as an element in the experience of American women's lives. Attention is given to networking and the creation of a sense of individual well-being. Abbott appears to be satisfied that the development of coping strategies will produce "immediate and significant increases in personal power for women in a variety of age, cultural, and ethnic categories." How, one wonders. "Networking" was not discovered by feminists in the 1960s, though they may have named it. Networking among women has been functioning for generations in quilting groups, in church groups (note the example of Slavic women in Abbott's essay), in PTAs, and in the
Junior League. In Iowa, for example, a group known diminuatively as the "Porkettes" is the women's auxiliary of the Pork Producers Association, despite the fact that many of these women are intimately involved in the farm operation. While there can be no doubt that these groups have increased the sense of well-being among their members and have served to ward off the sense of isolation associated with powerlessness, they have at the same time had a conservative function in legitimizing the powerless condition of women, at least in American life. They have organized women into herds sanctioning the male power structure. They have surely done as much to stultify as they have to "awaken." Satisfaction with life, a worthy goal and one not to be ignored by any individual, is quite a different goal from that of a suppressed group which desires to share an equitable portion of the power in a society. If women, white or of color, young or old, are to achieve power in American life they must understand and challenge forthrightly the structures of power as they are summarized in the early portions of Abbott's essay.

—Faye Pauli Whitaker

Critique

Analyzing the variety of ways in which socio-economic phenomena interact with socio-biological phenomena in women's and men's lives is a complex business. Abbott's essay is to be applauded, therefore, in that it directs attention to a subject often treated superficially, if not more frequently ignored.

Abbott clearly points out the lack of universality (with regard to specifics) of the effect of gender, or gender and aging in tandem, on women's access to power and its sources. At the same time, despite this diversity, she reminds us that "women consistently experience and exercise less power than men" and that "modernization and technolog-
ical innovation have served to depress the status of women in those limited realms where some degree of authority had been accorded by the traditional culture.”

The concept of power, how it is (or should be) defined, and whether it should be used as an organizing concept in analyzing women’s lives are the subjects of much discussion in women’s scholarship. While one might object to Abbott’s use of the seven categories she chooses, the categories serve the purpose of her argument. Her conclusion that these categories are not particularly applicable to women’s life patterns should not come as a surprise to us. More interesting are Abbott’s other conclusions: (1) that women should develop strategies to gain access to power in traditional (male empowered) occupational fields, and (2) that there might be other sources of power available to women.

The essay contains discussions of both personal and institutional power but Abbott’s emphasis in strategy development appears to be on the development of personal power. As a political strategy one has to be skeptical of any hope for power equity that relies on women infiltrating men’s jobs. Encouraging women to enter into, for instance, spiritual and technologically oriented professions, or other careers that offer “legitimate access to power” might give a sense of accomplishment to individual women and even allow some women a measure of limited power. But will it cause a more equitable distribution of power and authority within the profession? Will it redefine the perspectives, values, and standards of the profession in ways that will redistribute the sources of power? Adding women and mixing will not necessarily change hierarchal structures, exclusionary practices, or power abuses.

The second conclusion, that women might make use of other sources of power, is more provocative. What Abbott calls “networks” have been going on for generations in American society and elsewhere, in what feminists call “women’s culture” and in the various organizations and communities of women. Furthermore, in societies where there is formal acknowledgment of a separate sphere for women, or where women and men may lead almost separate lives, there appears to be (despite modernization) a type of power and strength attributed to women that is often missing in more “egalitarian” societies. Oftentimes, as Abbott suggests, this power is tied to land ownership, control of the food supply, or identification with religious deities. But it can also be tied to traditional notions of reproductive capabilities and the value placed on mothering and grandmothering. Whether or not power in these instances constitutes “legitimate” or “illegitimate” power depends on who is doing the defining, obviously.

Abbott notes that there can be strength in numbers. Certainly the
number of aged women of all colors is growing in the U.S. And the percentage of women in this category who are substantially removed from institutional power or even personal power sources climbs. While support, solace, and coping strategies may come from the types of interaction Abbott suggests, unless real economic and institutional changes are made, the interaction of gender and age will continue to result in "gross inequities in the distribution of power," victimization, and exclusion of a significant segment of society from their rights as citizens.

—Lillian H. Jones
Reclaiming the Subject:
Italian American Women Self-Defined
Chris Ruggiero

Introduction

In the last twenty years there have been a number of historical and sociocultural studies of Italian Americans. Few, however, have seriously addressed the female experience in the Italian American culture. Indeed, Italian American literature is so deeply immersed in a masculinist view of the Italian American culture that a female corrective to this asymmetry is not enough. Upon critically reviewing the literature, the necessity for a feminist perspective becomes obvious. Consequently, the purpose of this article is two-fold: 1) to expose some of the mythology which surrounds the image of Italian American women; and 2) to suggest a feminist framework within which future studies of Italian American women may take place.

Traditional ethnic studies scholarship has tended to ignore or dismiss recent feminist contributions to social science methodology and content areas. When feminist criticism is leveled at an area of study which has remained, for the most part, unaffected by feminist scholarship, the question of “objectivity” is often raised. “Is your point of view empirically supported or is your point of view simply reflective of a self-interested ideology?” The tone of this question implies that traditional literature, that to which the feminist scholar feels compelled to reply, is objective and lies somehow outside the rubric of ideology. It is this claim that the feminist scholar must first address.

To the charge of “bias,” one can only reply that we are all, in some sense, biased; i.e., we are subjectively confined to a perspective defined by that which we know to be true. Thus, we must learn to identify our biases. These perspectives only become dangerous when they remain unacknowledged. To an Italian American feminist, the unacknowledged biases of authors of Italian American literature and researchers who study the Italian American family can be profoundly suffocating. As traditional biases move from a subterranean existence to articulation,
and as research methodologies are chosen on the basis of their ability to reduce the tendency toward objectification, the real life experiences and needs of Italian American women will begin to emerge.

**Traditional Literature: A Selected Review**

Beyond the routinely unconscious acceptance of a male-defined reality, we find within much of the literature on Italian Americans a more deliberate defense of the role of women within the Italian American family. This defense often rests on the old separate-but-equal argument; woman is the heart, man is the head of the family—both parts being played by equally vital and powerful members of that family. A description of the social history of the Italian immigrant family included in Mindel and Habenstein's anthology, *Ethnic Families in America* (1976), even suggests that "... the patriarchal image of the [Italian] family is ... misleading since the major kinship ties were with the maternal relatives." As the singular proof of this quasi-matriarchal arrangement, the reader learns that in Italy, upon the death of the husband, the widow's family traditionally assumes responsibility for the woman and her children. Can we really equate the assumption of responsibility by the widow's family for the welfare of a woman and her children during a time of acute crisis with the assumption of ultimate familial authority daily expressed in the person of the husband, that is, the patriarch of the family?

In reality, sex-typed behavior which has devolved from the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy) to contemporary Italian American families has been strictly, patriarchally defined. Convention dictates that from the time an Italian girl reaches the age of seven, she is trained to care for the household of her father which serves, in turn, as preparation for the care of her husband's household. The death of her husband tends to sever kinship ties to his family. She is then expected to join either a grown son to care for his household or return to her family of origin if her son has not reached adulthood. Where in this scenario of possibilities do we find evidence of a misleading patriarchal image?

When the socialization of male and female children in the Italian American culture is examined at all, the differences are relativistically, uncritically presented. More often than not, the authors suggest that differential sex role expectations are simply reminiscent of *la via vecchia*—the old way. Because the distinct definitions and separation of sex roles are part of the cultural tradition, they remain somehow immune to critical analysis.

In *Blood of My Blood* (1974), Richard Gambino's discussions of family roles and "the ideal of womanliness" represent, perhaps, the clearest
encounter one can have in Italian American literature with the romanticization of the Italian American woman. Referring to the sex role expectations that Italian American women have inherited from the old world, Gambino explains that a woman who is not safely secured within the domestic sphere either as daughter, wife or mother becomes "truly a base, unfortunate creature" in the eyes of others. Without the ideal woman as the heart of the family, he continues, there would be no family, and without the family, "critical to life, civilization and culture, life would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Therefore, Gambino concludes, the "... family's ultimate aim for a girl was to see her . . . settled and competent in her role as a woman." Italian American girls have, by and large, inherited these old world expectations.

Much of Richard Gambino's portrayal of the female role in the Italian American family appears to be phenomenologically true. But when he leaves the realm of pure description by, for example, claiming that motherhood constitutes a revered place in the culture and a fulfilling role for women, he is, perhaps, caught in his own subjective web of nostalgia and romance. Had Gambino interviewed Italian American daughters, wives and mothers, a different, more accurate image of the female role might have emerged. Having failed to directly inquire of Italian American women what our needs, desires, hopes and fears depend upon, he simply Italianizes the patriarchal myth of the proper female role. It is assumed that because Italian American women often do assume the prescribed female role within the family, that it is a natural, satisfying and sacrosanct relationship.

Indeed, few oral histories of Italian American women have been documented. Mary Sansone's story represents one of the earliest accounts. In her discussion of marriage and motherhood, she stands as a living contradiction to the romantic ideal of the Italian American woman.

Being married was very difficult for me to get used to. I'm going to be very honest. When I think back to all the nights that I cried... And I would never say anything to anybody. I always looked like I was happy and gay. It was very difficult for me because I was outgoing, you know, and all of a sudden I found myself confined to a house, a husband, and then children... So it was kind of rough.

How would Mary Sansone feel about Richard Gambino's assertion that the man is the head and the woman is the heart or the center of the Italian American family? He claims that these relationships were transported from nineteenth century southern Italy where "power usually flowed from the family." Even if this were true, the fact remains that in the United States, where power depends upon economic and political success in the public domain, the woman who resides at the domestic "center" frequently becomes the woman as wage laborer, housekeeper, babysitter,
tutor, laundress, gardener, chauffeur and cook. It is possible that only those who have failed to experience the reality to which Mary Sansone testifies can perpetuate the myth of separate-but-equal spheres for men and women in the Italian American household.

Herbert Gans's *The Urban Villagers* (1962) represents one of the classic sociological studies of Italian Americans. Although he does not romanticize women's place in the domestic sphere, his work is so heavily weighted with information about Italian American males that women are, for the most part, excluded from a description of the culture. The omission of the Italian American female experience is particularly unfortunate in this case. Gans's research method of participant-observation might have provided us with valuable information about the female role in the Italian American family and community."

For seven months Gans lived in an Italian American community in Boston where he studied the effects of an urban renewal and relocation project on the local residents. While living in the neighborhood in question, Herbert Gans and his wife became acquainted with their neighbors and, as guests in their homes, had an unusual opportunity to observe the activities in the female sphere. As an observer of social life in Boston's West End (in which fully half the residents were women), it is difficult to imagine how an earnest sociologist could have failed to observe, at least informally, the activities of women. Gans makes a serious mistake with this omission, for he claims to have studied a whole population from which he drew conclusions about an Italian American community of men and women. The absence of any significant information on women, then, throws his entire study into question.

**The Italian American Woman: Her Own Voice**

The masculinist bias illustrated in works like those produced by Richard Gambino and Herbert Gans has inspired more recent gender-balanced contributions to Italian American studies. *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (1978) is a collection of essays which self-consciously addresses the unique experiences of Italian American and Italian Canadian women. Two presuppositions run through the articles: that Italian immigrants to North America and their descendents require special attention as a group, and that women as a group also deserve to be viewed as separate from the male-dominated whole. Thus, a collection of essays was born which addresses itself to a twice-focused group—Italian American/Canadian women.

Why is it, then, that mistakes found in the mainstream, traditional literature repeat themselves? The fault does not lie with the individual authors, but rather with the ubiquitous nature of patriarchal reality and
its influence on our research methodologies. Without a critical awareness of the broader context within which women's lives take shape—a patriarchal context—the conceptual framework upon which to analyze women's lives becomes weak. Again, the Italian American woman is placed at the "center" of the culture, she is imbued with maternal "power" portrayed to correspond to the power of men. Yet, as has been pointed out again and again in feminist theory, any power experienced by women is primarily experienced in the domestic sphere which itself is governed by the laws and principles of the public domain.\(^8\) Granted, Italian American women have had to be creative and strong. And it is important to remember that most immigrant and working class women have also possessed this creative strength; but endurance—for that is what it boils down to—does not imply power within a context which demands that women endure a social arrangement which is, by definition, an unequal one.

The essays contained in this collection are nevertheless important contributions to our understanding of Italian American women. The research which they represent remains qualitatively more accurate than that which is contained in the traditional, mainstream literature on Italian Americans if only because special efforts were made to consult women as reservoirs of cultural information.

Recently there have appeared works on Italian American women which adhere more closely to a feminist method and content. For example, Jean Scarpaci concentrates on methodological questions in her article, "La Contadina, The Plaything of the Middle Class Woman Historian."\(^9\) She does well to remind the feminist historian that, although women may be studied as a distinct social group, women's history must also be studied in relation to male history.

Mirian Cohen, in her study of the educational and occupational experiences of Italian American women, "Italian Women in New York City, 1900-1950: Work and School," seems to follow Scarpaci's methodological prescription.\(^10\) To isolate, for instance, the occupational and educational histories of Italian American women from the parallel experiences of Italian American men would be misleading. In her investigation of the large numbers of second and third-generation Italian American women entering the work force for the first time, Cohen hints at the importance of sociohistorical contextualization by referring to an expanding white collar sector of the economy and its effect on women.

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (1977) comes closer to a feminist examination of the Italian American family. One reason for this
emphasis may be traced to her methods of research. Breaking out of the purely quantitative methods of research which tend to dominate social science and historical research, while at the same time avoiding Richard Gambino's impressionistic, narrative style, Yans-McLaughlin makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of research. This break with traditional modes of research is intentional. The author states:

The inadequacy of quantitative evidence alone... will become apparent at several critical points in this book. The form and availability of statistical evidence determine the questions posed, and narrow the historian's visions. It is not enough to know that Italian families experienced low rates of dissolution or illegitimacy, high population turnover, and significant male unemployment. By themselves, these facts give us a one-dimensional view of Italian immigrant life. I hope that even though this book views Italians from only one perspective–through the lens of their family experience—it provides a less myopic view. The use of both qualitative and quantitative evidence permits an understanding of the subtle ways in which family, culture and class interact and adapt, suggesting a wholeness of experience their one-dimensional quantification cannot describe.\[1]\n
The creation of a composite picture of Italian American life—one which does not ignore gender-specific evidence—is the most obvious, positive outcome of Yans-McLaughlin's multi-faceted method. Her scholarly dedication to uncovering inaccessible, perhaps unpopular, themes makes her contributions vital to the body of Italian American literature.

Helen Barolini's *Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (1985) truly distinguishes itself among the available works on Italian American women. By identifying the culture of silence traditionally inhabited by Italian American women and placing it within the concentrically larger contexts of the Italian American culture and patriarchal society, Barolini begins to do justice to the layers of Italian American female experience. Her collection of writings by Italian American women represents a chorus of voices, formerly muffled. While her lengthy introduction explicates "the historical and social context of silence," Barolini allows the individual authors to speak for themselves, to at last become audible.\[12]\n
Looking at the extant literature which provides glimpses into the Italian American culture, the researcher begins to piece together a larger picture within which a description of Italian American women might take place. Authors working from a traditional perspective fail to place the Italian American family in a nexus of social relations which itself sharply follows along the lines of those who possess power and those who are powerless—a relationship referred to by Adrienne Rich as "the essential dichotomy."\[14] In this context it becomes a gratuitous exercise to suggest that Italian American women hold positions of power within the family structure. Not only is this a spurious description of the Italian American woman's position in the family, once she steps outside of the
household, she is quite literally at the mercy of a patriarchal power structure which exercises free reign in the public domain.

Recommendations for Future Research

To create a feminist reinterpretation of the role of Italian American women, then, requires the identification and critical assessment of the following misconceptions which pervade the literature:

1. **Men and women inhabit separate-but-equal-spheres.** This is often expressed in the phrase, "woman is the heart, man is the head" of the Italian American family. No conceptual framework is used to illuminate the relationship between the public and domestic domains.

2. **The role of women in the Italian American family is a "sacred" one.** In reality, the fundamental distinctions in sex role socialization within Italian American families subordinates the position of females.

3. **Without a firm association with the family, Italian American men and women are reduced to the same depressed status in the culture.** In truth, the Italian American man can separate himself from the traditional family structure and still retain his identity and self-esteem as a productive member of society in the public domain. Italian American women, on the other hand, experience profound alienation from Italian American culture in the absence of family life—traditionally their raison d'etre. 14

4. **The Italian American woman becomes somehow inauthentic once she steps outside of the rigidly prescribed gender role expectations of the Italian American culture.** Indeed, movement away from patriarchal sex roles may constitute the first step toward truly authentic being for Italian American women.

5. **Research conclusions may be reached regarding Italian American communities while failing to look at those aspects of community life in which women are active.** Such one-sided reporting is simply a description of the male domain as it is expressed in the Italian American community; it does not represent the life of a community as a whole.

6. **Analyses of the family may take place in isolation from a critical analysis of the larger social context.** Conventional social science and historical research repeatedly participate in what has been referred to in feminist theory as "context stripping." 15 As a result, myths surrounding family interrelationships and the family's relationship to larger society abound.

7. **Conventional research methodologies are adequate when unconventional content areas are to be examined.** As the lives of
women become legitimate foci for scholarly research, new methodologies may be necessary. Work exemplified by such scholars as Scarpaci, Cohen, Yans-McLaughlin, Caroli and Barolini hints at some possible approaches to research on Italian American women.

Once we identify and evaluate the above misconceptions within traditional portrayals of the Italian American culture we are left with a need for an accurate picture of the real, everyday activities and perceptions of Italian American women, both inside and outside the family structure. It is at this point that the research project may require a movement toward becoming a collaborative interaction between researcher and consultant.

As scholars in the fields of ethnic and women's studies, it is vital that we reduce the tendency to regard the people we are studying as objects of study, as simple repositories of information. Perhaps first and foremost, research on Italian American women should initiate dialogue among Italian American women themselves. Not only have the life histories of Italian American women been kept from the larger population, but Italian American women are often isolated from each other. As women, we must begin to name, in our own language, the world in which we live.

As women, we inhabit our world with a double consciousness. We are in and of our society but in important ways also not “of” it. We see and think in the terms of our culture . . . Yet we have always another consciousness, another potential language within us . . . We are the instruments of observation and understanding; we are the namers and interpreters of our lives.16

It is this other consciousness, the voice of the subject, which must surface in any future study of Italian American women. We must “hear each other into speech” so that emancipatory options may be explored, not only by Italian American women, but by every woman wishing to critically question her place in family and community life.17

Notes


4. Ibid., 165.


Critique

Ruggiero’s stated purpose is “... to expose ... the mythology which surrounds the image of Italian American women ...” through studies of Italian American women and the Italian American family in a “feminist framework.” These new studies would offer “feminist method and content” and new, unconventional methodologies would provide a “female corrective” to the “masculinist bias [found in] traditional ethnic studies scholarship.” Ruggiero’s motives are laudable, but she fails to clarify either the “masculinist,” “sex-typed” viewpoint she criticizes or the new “feminist” methodology she advocates. A “selected review” of “traditional literature” she offers by way of explanation becomes a rostrum for condemnation of the “masculinist” motives, methods, and conclusions in the works considered (by R. Gambino, H. Gans, B. B. Caroli, C. Mindel and R. W. Habenstein, and others).

The “more accurate image of the female role” she would have them portray is undefined. Undefined also is the requisite “qualitative” research as basis for the methodology she advocates. Acknowledging that “we must learn to identify our biases,” Ruggiero fails to offer the means by which “feminist” scholarship can avoid committing the same signs of bias and narcissism as the “masculinist” authors cited. Evidence and examples offered in support of her position are presented as
assertions such as “Sex-typed behavior . . . has devolved from the Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy) . . .” or simplistic, contradictory non sequiturs. What is “sex-typed behavior” and how is it attributable to only one region in one country?

In Ruggiero’s “Recommendations for Future Research,” the promised clarification of intent and methodological structure is missing. We are offered, instead, a catalogue of proverbs, arbitrary statements, and vaguely described research procedures—all labeled “misconceptions” to be identified and assessed. Absent are suggested premises and parameters for a “feminist” methodology or even rhetorical questions which might define the scope of these studies.

Among the areas of study that should be included in Ruggiero’s “feminist” methodology are:

—Sociological and economic conditions in the Italian provinces from which the subjects emigrated in their demographic representation in the communities studied;

—Generational differences in attitude and behavior within the families and groups studied;

—Differences in “public” vs. “private” behavior patterns among Italian Americans: Are these different norms limited to women only, or does the dichotomy extend to all members of the family? For whom and when is the “private” image revealed? And how valid are studies that draw only upon the “public” image?

—Is “The man is head of the family and the woman the heart” a public statement? And how is it translated in actual behavior and attitudes? In Italian American families, who really makes decisions? And how do the different family members perceive their own roles and positions in the immediate family? In the macro- or extended family? In the community? Are there noticeable differences in the ways men and women perceive their roles?

Implied, but not stated in Ruggiero’s proposal for a new methodology, is the value of studies by women, from a “woman’s point of view,” because men (whether fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons) are rarely privy to the private thoughts and feelings expressed by women to each other. Outside the family, men have few opportunities to observe anything but public behavior by women. Male strangers, coming from outside the family or culture, have even fewer opportunities. If male researchers have failed to portray Italian American women accurately, their failure is due more to genetics than to methodology.

Studies of intra- and inter-familial behavior among Italian Americans should also consider women’s roles and behavior in Italy before emigration. Did they change after immigrating? And what effect did new
economic and social circumstances have on their behavior and on the family structure? In the shaping of attitudes, behavior and relationships, what was the role of music and ethnic traditions? What functions did these traditions have in Italian American families and communities? Are there any noticeable demographic or generational differences in the extent to which “popular” (or “folk”) traditions and culture have been retained by Italian Americans?

Assuming a successful resolution of the questions raised, will studies of Italian Americans based on new methodologies and a “feminist” frame of reference provide new insights for similar studies of other cultures? Can valid conclusions be obtained from studies of individual ethnic groups apart from their social and cultural contexts? Will the results of such studies lend credibility to a specifically “feminist” viewpoint? Or will these studies, instead, confirm the need for a “humanist” approach that recognizes gender-based differences in attitude and behavior as functions of the human condition and social dynamics and formulate its methodology, observations and conclusions accordingly?

— Gloria Eive

Critique

The results of the 1980 United States census indicate that about twelve million persons were reported as being partly or solely of Italian ancestry. One in twenty people in the United States or 5.4 percent of the total U.S. population claims Italian descent, representing the sixth largest group in the United States.

Given their significant representation in the population, Italian Americans are a legitimate area of investigation. It is, in addition, a particularly challenging arena for feminist scholars because of the traditional role of women in a culture profoundly influenced by the metaphor of the Madonna. As a result, Italian society has been described as a mother-centered but a male-dominated culture. That male dominance has, unfortunately, sometimes been shaped by values characterized by the following proverb:

Like a good weapon she should be cared for properly,
Like a hat she should be kept straight,
Like a mule she should be given plenty of work and occasional beatings,
Above all, she should be kept in her place as a subordinate.
To some degree the polarization of Italian male and female roles was exacerbated by the experience of immigration. The consequent social reorientation caused males to express outwardly even more dominance in an effort to compensate for the growing insecurity in this unfamiliar environment where their traditional values were continually assaulted.

Despite patriarchal imprecations against the abandonment of *la via vecchia*, however, children and grandchildren were inexorably drawn to the emblems and values of their adopted culture. The resulting acculturation is evident in the fact that by 1980 eighty percent of women reporting partial Italian ancestry had married outside the ethnic group. An earlier 1964 study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center noted a significant distancing by third generation Italian American women, fifty-eight percent of whom had married outside the traditional confines of the Roman Catholic Church. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Italian American woman’s demographic profile today is not congruent with the image of “woman as the heart of the family.” In 1980 Italian American women had approximately 2.5 children, slightly below the national average, and they reported a divorce rate of 4.8 percent, more than double the two percent noted in 1974, and only .5 percent below the national average of 5.3 percent. The same census report revealed that while only one-third of the first generation Italians were high school graduates, fully sixty percent of the second generation had graduated from high school, lending support to the 1975 findings of the National Opinion Research Center, which in tabulating family incomes of ethnic groups, ranked Italians third from the top.

These few indicators cited suggest the tendency of Italian Americans to enter the mainstream, and, in the process, dilute many of their cultural traditions. This has given rise to a variety of responses alluded to by Micaela Di Leonardo in *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class and Gender among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). She contends that “Italian-American women have embraced, modified and rejected” the traditional mother-centered role. In Di Leonardo’s estimation, economic context rather than inherited ethnic family culture has “influenced the structure and functioning of the Italian-American household.”

If, in examining the traditional image of the Italian American woman, Ruggiero intends to focus on the females among the 831,922 Italian foreign-born persons in the United States in 1980, the research model is complicated by variables of age, class, and regional difference. For example, the G.I. war brides and their successors have been, on the whole, better educated, more frequently nurtured in urban centers, and generally reflective of contemporary Italian cosmopolitan tastes—all
factors contributing to a far greater degree of acculturation than their earlier counterparts, who often emigrated from the agricultural villages of southern Italy in the decades preceding America's imposition of strict immigration quotas in 1924. These two groups represent extremes within the complex spectrum of immigrant experience. Yet both have manifested a sufficient degree of acculturation as to render relatively evanescent the traditional mother-centered image posited by Ruggiero.

The researcher's task is further complicated by the fact that the values and adaptive behavior of immigrant Italians have been reflective of their socio-economic class. Their adaptation was also affected by the prevailing conditions in their receiving environment. Even greater was the influence of their villages and regions of origin. It is extremely important, therefore, to concentrate on the immigrant's place of origin, since it was not until Mussolini's ascension in the 1920s that the concept of the Italian nation gained widespread acceptance.

The complex and dynamic issues of immigration, particularly the status of the sexes within an intergenerational context, are made even more difficult by the frame of reference of traditional investigators who by continuing to ask the same questions elicit the same skewed answers. In light of this, it is not the feminist researchers who are guilty of bias, as the author observes, but rather the traditional researchers whose conceptual frameworks are biased. As a result, these conventional histories, according to Deconstructionist critic Jacques Derrida, are no more than petitions sent forward by the culture, containing implicitly approved code words and using canons of research and interpretation approved by the power structure. Such history, the Deconstructionists contend, rests firmly though falsely upon the concepts and perspectives approved by a male authority. Feminist historians and social scientists are indeed needed to revise the categories of questions and revamp the framework of study. Thus, Ruggiero's analysis is appropriate.

The obvious need for feminist enquiry into the field of Italian American women's studies has accelerated the pace of research on both sides of the Atlantic, a trend which should be welcomed by the author. Eleven percent of the respondents to a 1983 survey by the American Italian Historical Association reported on research in women's studies ranging from the changing role of the Italian American woman to the psycho-social conflicts experienced by Italian Americans. There were as well several studies comparing Italian American women with women of other ethnic groups. Additional research projects have focused on food exchange as gifts and on food preparation as woman's work. Charles Zappia of the University of California, Berkeley, is investigating Italian American women workers in the International Ladies Garment Workers
Union. While in Italy, Giovanna Clavi has researched Italian American factory women. L. Cetti has documented the life and work of Italian American women in New York City and M. Tirabassi has examined the Americanization of Italian women and children.

The one universal rendered by these examinations is that immigrant history is complex and changing. Consequently, the stereotypical image of the Italian American woman needs to be fine tuned and refined through a series of microhistorical studies more clearly focused on the issues of class, kinship, region of emigration, and generation. Finally, if as the data suggest, the Italian American woman is evolving from *paisana* to professional and suburbanite, her constraints and opportunities may be those shared by her American sisters, and the misconceptions against which the author urges vigilance may be methodological considerations deprived of a test population to sample.

— Gloria Ricci Lothrop
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The Editor Notes...

The Executive Council is challenging members to become more involved on a continuing basis with the revised newsletter, which changes its name to *The Ethnic Reporter* with Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 1986). The recognition that this publication is more than a newsletter is significant in that it provides yet another avenue of publication for members who have information to share which does not fit the format of a research journal. The first issue of *The Ethnic Reporter* includes an index of the first ten years; the index will be useful to those who want some historical perspective on what the Association has done over the past decade.

This issue of *Explorations* gives us an opportunity to look at a methodology for ethnic studies—a methodology beyond the limitations of social science constructs. Hatfield’s contribution can help us deal with seemingly inane questions: one student, for example, recently asked me if blacks from the Caribbean and blacks from the United States were of the same race. Whatever answer you develop from such a question will depend a good deal on what you think of identity or race. These “loaded” labels continue to confront and challenge those of us seeking definitions and solutions. “Female Power, Ethnicity, and Aging” and “Reclaiming the Subject: Italian American Women Self-Defined,” along with the critiques accompanying them, test Hatfield’s paradigm.

The editor extends a note of appreciation to Ron McMillen of Sigler Printing for re-figuring our summer of 1985 publication costs; the reduced charges made Vol. 9, No. 1 possible. The editor requests you pay your dues so we can keep the publications coming your way.

—Charles C. Irby
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