

## Critique

In reading Alan Spector's paper, I was reminded of British sociologist Christie Davies' cross-national analysis of ethnic jokes. In it, she argues that majority members of a society stereotype others in order to reduce their own anxiety about social position. Davies found that such jokes tend to fall into either one of two categories. The first and most common type of ethnic joke addresses those groups who live below one's own station in life.<sup>1</sup> By referring to them, one can elevate his/her own status and hence feel a bit more secure. A second type of joke ridicules groups who appear to be especially successful. By showing overachieving groups in a negative light, the average member of society can feel a bit better about his/her own lack of achievement. The "superachievers" are depicted as so inhuman, immoral, work-driven or tight-fisted that their accomplishments are pointless. Spector's paper draws important parallels between the experience of Asians and Jews, two groups most often depicted as "negative successes" in popular stereotypes.

It is the social structural position of Jews and Asians in many societies—as middle minorities—together with their cultural differences from the majority, that makes them subject to stereotypes. In addition to the commonalities of Jews and Asians that Spector mentions, several other similarities come to mind. One is blocked access to higher education.

From the twenties to the 1940s, Ivy League colleges imposed quotas to limit the number of high-achieving Jewish students. Today, Asian students are experiencing some of the same problems in gaining admission to elite public and private universities. This suggests that when the "meritocratic" criteria of a society become a path for minority mobility, they are likely to be revised.

Another problem these groups encounter is limited career options. Historically, Jews and Asians have been excluded from management positions in large corporations. Instead, they have concentrated in self-employment or technical specialties. The channeling of gifted young Asians into limited-interaction technical professions in the U.S. is nearly identical to the herding of "politically suspect" Jews into engineering and medicine in the USSR. The perceived "otherness" of each group makes them ineligible for highly visible and politically salient occupations.

While both Jews and Asians have been victims of the stereotypes of the larger society, many members of these groups have also suffered from the paternalism of co-ethnics. When the prejudice of the larger society lumps persons together in ethnic ghettos, weaker members of such groups are ripe for exploitation. For example, in the 19th century, assimilated Jewish Americans of German origin worked hard to resocialize the swarthy and communistic arrivals from Eastern Europe

to avoid raising the resentment of Christian Americans. More recently, Soviet and Israeli Jewish immigrants have been chastised by the Jewish right for not living in Israel, by the left for their Republican Party allegiance, and by the faithful for their lack of religiosity.

Similarly, while 19th century Chinese were sometimes exploited by Chinatown labor contractors, recent Asian immigrants experience various forms of co-ethnic hostility as well. Established Asian-Americans who have worked hard to “fit in” are sometimes embarrassed by the foreignness of Southeast Asian refugees. Further, left-leaning Asian-Americans take umbrage at rightist, pro-capitalist immigrants from Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea. Other established Asians hire recent arrivals for starvation wages in sweatshops, factories, and restaurants. In such cases, established Jews and Asians hunger for success and acceptance in the larger society to the extent that they may stereotype and mistreat members of their own ethnic community. This may be one of the cruelest manifestations of the larger society’s prejudice.

In conclusion, Asians and Jews alike are victims of the stereotypes of American society. Further, the weakest members of these minority groups are doubly oppressed—both by Americans and co-ethnics. As Spector claims, the media that circulate stories of immigrant success are partly to blame for the unfortunate images that haunt these groups. However, the author might also consider the larger social structure that sets the context in which stereotypes manifest themselves. A society which worships success, yet simultaneously makes it elusive, can be a driving force behind discrimination and inequality. We may never be able to develop ethnic harmony in a system which fosters social insecurity and pits group against group—requiring each to exploit the other in order to achieve a measure of success.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Christie Davies. “Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries.” *British Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 33, No. 3 (1982) 383-403.

—Steve Gold