

## An Investigation of National versus Ethnic Identity Among White South African Students

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of structural and cultural variables on 'identificational assimilation' within a group of white college students in South Africa. Measurement of the nature of social and cultural pluralism<sup>1</sup> in a society as complex as South Africa is crucial to an understanding of the processes of social change within it, as well as predictions of its future shape. Whilst some approaches to the society view the white elite as a unified power block,<sup>2</sup> others claim that '... members of the various ethnic groups in South Africa share no common system of values'<sup>3</sup> and so attention has been drawn to the cleavages of language, degree of urbanization, and subsequent political differences.<sup>4</sup> In view of the importance of such 'cleavages', this project attempted to separate national and ethnic identity, as well as related social and religious factors, within a particular white ethnic group.

Gordon is well-known for his study of assimilation in American life, in which he abstracts seven types of assimilation: cultural or behavioural assimilation ('change of cultural patterns to those of the host society'); structural assimilation ('large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of the host society, on primary group level'); marital assimilation ('large-scale intermarriage'); identificational assimilation ('development of sense of people-hood based exclusively on host society'); attitude receptional assimilation

('absence of discrimination'); and civic assimilation ('absence of value and power conflict')<sup>5</sup>. This typology therefore reflects two basic forms of assimilation: *structural assimilation* (structural, marital, attitude and behaviour receptional, and civic assimilation), and *cultural assimilation* (cultural or behavioural, and identificational assimilation), which both reflects and controls the first. Thus, sub-group identities may have important restraining or integrating effects on the assimilation process and their relationship to structural and cultural assimilation is, it is suggested, of crucial importance. Where the identity of the host society is accepted, for example, both forms of assimilation may be accelerated. When such identity is resisted, as may be the case with ethnic groups, such assimilation will be restrained and uneven; and the host society may object to the lack of national identity and make further structural assimilation more difficult.

Jews were chosen for study as their ethnicity is resilient and their social position is both nationally and internationally insecure. As a group, then, they are particularly suited to a study of assimilation as their social and cultural boundaries are sharply defined. Three hypotheses were formulated as follows:

1. Structural assimilation (high social participation in the general society) is positively related to national identity;

2. Cultural assimilation (low ethnicity, such as religious orthodoxy and conformity) is positively related to national identity;
3. Positive perception of the general society (perception of the society as non-prejudiced) is positively related to national identity.

**PROCEDURE**

A questionnaire containing items on background information, religious orthodoxy and conformity, participation in college life, perception of South African society, and personal identity was developed. Selected for study were all the members of a students' organization at a large university in South Africa to which most Jewish students belonged. The questionnaire was mailed to the students and despite initial resistance, participation was high (80 students, approximately 80 per cent).

The variables selected for analysis included background, social, religious, and perceptual characteristics. These were age, father's occupation, length of residence in South Africa, degree of participation in campus activities, degree of religious orthodoxy and conformity and perception of a degree of general South African prejudice against Jews. Personal identity was ascertained by requesting the student to select one of the following categories as his predominant identity: a South African, a South African Jew, a Jewish South African, a Jew. The results were tabulated and a gamma matrix interrelating both independent and dependent variables was developed.

**RESULTS**

The great majority of the students was ethnic in identity. Thus, 66 per cent classified themselves as either Jewish South Africans or Jews, while 33 per cent claimed to be South Africans or South African Jews. The highly non-South African orientation thus points to the group's general non-assimilation into South African society.

Analysis of the interrelationship between the major variables is given in Table I, relating the predictor variables to a South African identity.<sup>6</sup>

The major trends may be summarized as follows:

1. Age is negatively related to national identity, as well as orthodoxy and religious conformity. It thus appears that assimilation is lower among the older students who also tend to perceive prejudice in the society at large.
2. On the other hand, the negative association between age and length of South African residence suggests that the older students have spent less time in the country. In general, however, we cannot claim increasing assimilation over time. One reason, may be the limited, cross-sectional nature of the study, while another interpretation would emphasize increasing awareness of ethnicity and subsequent disidentification from South African society.
3. Social class is negatively related to both perceived prejudice and national identity. It appears, then, that the middle class Jew is more assimilated into South African society despite the fact that his professional counterpart is less aware of anti-Semitism in the society at large. Origins are also positively associated with length of residence, suggesting that while residence results in lower perceived prejudice it does not develop increased assimilation among the upper class and professional Jews.<sup>7</sup>
4. Length of South African residence is associated with a decline in campus activities and a similar decline in perceived prejudice and increased national identity.
5. Campus activities show a slight positive association with national identity, thus providing some evidence for the hypothesis concerning structural assimilation.

*Table I*

**GAMMA MATRIX OF BACKGROUND, SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS, PERCEPTUAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY VARIABLES**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age		,02	-,17	,00	-,24	-,40	,40	-,33
2. Father's Occupation			,30	,04	,04	,00	-,10	-,20
3. Length of South African Residence				-,40	,10	,14	-,51	,21
4. Campus Activity					,19	,01	,04	,16
5. Degree of Orthodoxy						,10	,15	-,32
6. Degree of Conformity							,04	-,30
7. Degree of South African prejudice								,20
8. Degree of national identity								

6. Support for the hypothesis concerning cultural assimilation is provided in the results concerning degree of orthodoxy. While the gammas are not high, both orthodoxy and conformity are negatively related to assimilation. High participation in ethnic-religious culture thus restrains identification-  
al assimilation in the society at large.
7. Finally, the hypothesis concerning perceived prejudice is confirmed although, once again, the level of association is not very high. Thus, students who perceive less prejudice in the South African society at large tend to be national rather than ethnic in identity.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was to examine the effects of structural and cultural variables on

assimilation within an ethnic group, using personal identity as the dependent variable. The predominance of ethnic rather than national identity was found. As might be expected, the Jews in this group are relatively unassimilated into the society at large. However, examination of the variables relating to assimilation produces certain patterns: length of residence in South Africa, low religious involvement, and a positive perception of the society are positively related to a South African rather than Jewish identity. On the other hand, age and social class are negatively related to such an identity, even though there is a positive association between the latter and length of residence. It would thus appear that for certain social groups, structural and cultural assimilation is effective in developing identification-  
al assimilation but not for others who tend to remain socially and culturally incapsulated.

### REFERENCES

1. For a discussion of the term 'pluralism' see VAN DEN BERGHE, P. L. 1964 *Toward a Sociology of Africa*. *Social Forces*, 43, 11-18.
2. See, for example, BANTON, M. 1967 *White Supremacy in South Africa* (in: BANTON, M. ed. *Race Relations*. London, Tavistock, 164-93).
3. VAN DEN BERGHE, P. L.
4. See, for example, VAN DER MERWE, H. W. 1969 'Political unity and diversity among the white South African elite'. Paper read at the Conference of the African Studies Association, Montreal.
5. GORDON, M. M. 1964 *Assimilation in American Life, The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. New York, Oxford University Press, p. 71.
6. Gamma was used as all the variables were viewed as ordinal, including identity, in which a 'South African' identity was viewed as high assimilation through the other categories to 'Jew' which represents virtually no assimilation at all.
7. Non-South African Jews in this sample came in the main from Israel, their parents being immigrants to South Africa.

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