Assimilation, integration and identity in pluralist society*)

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A society is similar to a house divided into rooms and corridors. The more the society resembles ours in its form of civilization, the thinner are its internal partitions and the wider and more open are its doors of communication.

Arnold van Gennep,
The Rites of Passage.

It is the purpose of this paper to advance the systematic study of problems of cultural minorities in pluralist societies. To this end definitions that distinguish between "assimilation" and "integration" will be proposed; then a spiraling series of five interlocking problems is formulated that presents the compounding of effects of integration upon group identity.

A pluralist society is one that consists of groups that differ in their cultural heritage; that is, in their religion, their language, or both. In this context the following relationship pertains. The more a cultural group is apart from its society-at-large, the less will its identity and the identity of its members be in question — until the limiting case is reached when the group does not even form part of larger society but forms a self-contained society of its own. (Thus mediaeval Jewish ghettos were self-contained societies rather than parts of larger, inclusive societies.) Conversely, the more a cultural minority is integrated into a society of which it forms a part, the more the cultural identity of the group and of its members will become problematic — until the limiting case is reached when cultural identity vanishes as a complete merger into the culture of the society-at-large takes place.

As a cultural minority becomes integrated into a pluralist society its own identity becomes attenuated. This attenuation takes place in confrontation with a series of problems that may be perceived as beginning and ending in an attenuation of the degree of rejection of the defector or apostate by way of a shift of aspirations from membership in the fold of the group to citizenship in society-at-large. The resulting spiral of problems unfolds as follows.

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Problem 1: the rejection of defectors or apostates who remain fellow citizens.

Problem 2: combining the transmission of the group's cultural heritage with preparation for citizenship in society-at-large.

Problem 3: the expansion of the scope of aspirations from the fold of the group to society-at-large.

Problem 4: the effect of aspirations in society-at-large upon leadership selection within the group.

Problem 5: the effect of aspirations in society-at-large upon the already modified rejection of defectors or apostates.

To problem one: the more apart a cultural group from other cultural groups the clearer its identity will find expression in the rejection of its defectors, the more a cultural group is integrated into society-at-large with diverse cultural groups the more the rejection of defectors has to be tempered by considerations that are due to fellow citizens. Such modification of the group's rejection of its defectors attenuates group ties for all members of the group and thereby weakens the distinct identity of the group as a whole.

To problem two: in order to maintain its identity a cultural group has to transmit its cultural heritage. The more apart, the more effective the concentration of the group's effort upon transmitting its culture. The more thoroughly integrated into a pluralist society, the more preparation for citizenship in society-at-large will compete with and take precedence over the teaching and transmission of the group's cultural heritage. The more such preparation for citizenship in society-at-large takes precedence over initiation into the culture of the group the more the cultural identity of its members will be nominal rather than essential.

To problem three: the more apart a group the more the aspirations and expectations of its members will be confined to the fold of the group. Conversely, the more integrated a group into pluralist society of which it forms a part the stronger will be the aspirations of its members to achieve success in that society.

Aspirations in society-at-large rather than within the group itself constitute already some degree of alienation from the group; such alienation is actually compounded when the aspirations for success in society-at-large are motivated not only by the rewards offered by society but also by the rewards offered by the group for success in society-at-large. The prospect of dual reward for success outside of the group in society-at-large not only outside but even more so inside the group, will profoundly orient expectations and aspirations of group members away from the group to its society-at-large. Such orientation of aspirations away from the group will take place in direct proportion to the group's integration into society and will further weaken the distinct identity of the group and of its members.

To problem four: the more apart a group the more its leadership positions will be the
focus of the respect of the group and the object of aspirations of the group's elite. The more a group becomes integrated into a pluralist society the more will the shift of aspirations from the group to society downgrade and fragment the leadership of the group.

The greater the respect given by the group to its members for success outside of the group the less attractive will become the leadership positions within the group. At first, leadership positions will be filled by those whose aspirations have been limited to the fold of the group to begin with; eventually, leadership positions will attract those who have obtained status within the group by their success outside of the group in society-at-large.

The leaders whose aspirations had been focussed upon the group to begin with most likely embody the values and traditions of the group but they are apt to be marginal to society-at-large; those who achieved positions of leadership within the group on the basis of their success in society-at-large are likely to be marginal to the group in their values and orientations. The more integrated a group into a pluralist society, the more prevalent will be the latter among its leaders. The resulting fragmentation and downgrading in the group's leadership positions will attenuate the identity of the group further.

To problem five: the shifting of aspirations from the fold of the group to society-at-large not only fragments the selection of leadership of the group but also modifies further the rejection of those who defect from it. On the whole, success in society will be more easily achieved by those who conform than by those that are not ready to conform. Consequently, defection or near-defection from the group will in many cases facilitate success in society-at-large. In the resulting conflict between respect for achievement of success in society and rejection of the defector, rejection of the successful defector is apt to be modified by pride in the defector's success when such success is sufficiently conspicuous.

The respect by the group for success achieved outside of the group thus undermines the solidarity of the group in two ways: marginal members are recruited into leadership positions on the basis of achievements in society-at-large, and the rejection of defectors from the group, initially modified by considerations due to fellow-citizens, are tempered further by pride in and even identification with the defectors' achievements in society-at-large outside the fold of the group.

The spiral of five problems outlined above now stands in need of modifications and qualifications provided by historical research and survey inquiry. Such research and inquiry should also explore the relationship of subjectively accepted group identity to objectively recognized group identity in order to obtain a better understanding of what is involved in the coincidence or lack of coincidence of such objective and subjective group identification at various stages of group-integration and group-assimilation. A better understanding of the problems of imbalance between objective and subjective group identification should serve the development of a more comprehensive behavioral science theory of minority group relations.