THE SOCIAL CLASS AND GENDER DIFFERENCES WITHIN ABORIGINAL GROUPS IN CANADA: 1995-2000

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

This paper utilizes a multilayer class structure analysis framework to consider the nature and extent of inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada, including gender-specific dynamics and differential patterns among First Nation, Inuit and Métis populations.

Cet article utilise une analyse multicouches fondée sur la structure de classe pour examiner la nature et l'étendue de l'inégalité entre les Autochtones et les non Autochtones au Canada, y compris la dynamique sexospécifique et les tendances différentes entre les populations des Premières nations, les populations inuites et les populations métisses.

The application of ethnic deficit or "problem" analytical frameworks to issues affecting Aboriginal peoples has been a staple of Canadian political discourse since before Confederation. Since at least the 1857 enactment in Upper *Canada of the Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes in this Province,* analysis of high rates of poverty and social problems in Aboriginal communities have inevitably become entangled with the argument that the "problem" Aboriginal peoples face is the unwillingness of Aboriginal individuals to engage fully in the "mainstream" economy and society.

The specific philosophical foundations of the ethnic deficit model as applied to Aboriginal people have been extensively documented. They include a number of particularly tenuous presumptions: that the "problem," as it were, rests exclusively with the "troublesome behaviour" of Aboriginal people (RCAP 1996), and their refusal to desist in such behaviour; that the problem is the existence of Aboriginal people as individuals with distinct legal status; that the problem is by definition temporary, since resolution through assimilation into the dominant social, economic and cultural groups is inevitable "(Dunn 1994; Newhouse, *et al* 2005). Perhaps most significantly, the Aboriginal deficit framework tends to paint all individuals with indigenous ancestry with the same brush: be they from First Nations, Inuit or Métis communities; from reserves or cities, from North or South of the 60th parallel.

Fortunately, Aboriginal policy scholarship over the past two decades has done a great deal to expose the false pretences that sustain the Aboriginal deficit model. The *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* underscored the central role of colonial and early Canadian government policy decisions in contributing to Aboriginal poverty (RCAP 1996). Recent works by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, based on the United Nations Human Development Index or their own Community Well-being Index which allow for comparative analysis (both between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations and among

Aboriginal communities and sub-populations) according to basic measures of health and material well-being, highlight both the different realities faced by different Aboriginal communities and peoples, and the notable socioeconomic progress made by Aboriginal peoples relative to their non-Aboriginal peers. Finally, the ethnic deficit model has increasingly been subjected to challenges from Aboriginal scholars dedicated to highlighting the positive contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canada (Newhouse *et al* 2005).

And yet, it would be a mistake to suggest that the ethnic deficit model is no longer a major factor in Canadian Aboriginal policy discourse. In their analysis of their mandate, the commissioners of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples noted the presence of the Aboriginal "problem" in political discussions surrounding their mandate, even as they refused to be constrained by its philosophical underpinnings. (RCAP 1996) Writing in 2005 in the Preface to their book, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canadian Identity and Culture,* Aboriginal researchers David Newhouse, Cora Voyageur and Dan Beavon observed that the "problem" discourse remains prevalent in both the academic research and federal public service milieus. Newhouse wrote how all three "continually encounter notions about Indigenous peoples as highly resistant to change" (Newhouse 2005); Beavon described how the tendency within the public service to gravitate to negativist constructions of Aboriginal peoples "produces a distorted view in which [Aboriginal people] are portrayed as a people unable to do things for themselves or of proposing solutions to problems." (Beavon 2005)

This paper argues that continued effort towards the rejection of the ethnic deficit discourse as a framework for analyzing Aboriginal issues in Canada is necessary, and that success in eliminating this discourse as an active factor in public policy formulation is achievable – if the policy research community in particular is prepared to open the door to alternative analytical frameworks, including those that consider the role of social class structure in contributing to poverty and inequality. This paper argues that application of a class structure analysis framework would be useful in furthering analysis of the nature of inequality within Aboriginal populations. This argument rests on three presumptions, which are summarized here but not elaborated upon: first, that a class structure framework based on relations among labour, physical and financial capital (as opposed to one that sorts individuals according to income level or occupational status) remains a relevant, important lens through which to analyze social inequality, provided it can be reliably operationalized with existing data; second, that class structure is a preferable alternative to the ethnic deficit model as a means of enhancing understanding of issues affecting Aboriginal peoples; and third, given that processes of class formation, relations and structure of Aboriginal people have been largely ignored in the class analysis literature (with the commendable exceptions of Clement 1975, Mitchell 1996, Adams 1999, Wotherspoon 2003 & 2007), application of a class structure framework would yield new and useful knowledge.

We employ an adaptation of the multi-layer class framework originally developed by Erik Olin Wright (1983). This framework (workers, semi-autonomous workers, managers and supervisors, "petty bourgeois," and small employers) locates classes according to the following relations: degree of ownership/control of financial capital; degree of ownership/control of physical capital; and, degree of control of labour power and process. Wright's schema is attractive for two reasons: first, it can be operationalized using Canadian Census Public Use Microdata Files (PUMF) data; and, second, it provides more detailed analysis relative to other class structure frameworks separating a broad middle class into two categories (semi-autonomous workers and managers/supervisors), and thus offers a greater potential for analysis (see also Li, 1988, 1992).

For this study, the framework is constructed by recoding and combining the variables COWP (class of worker) and OCC91P (Occupation) for the 1996 census, and COWP (class of worker) and NOCHRDP (Occupation - Employment Equity Designations - based on The National Occupational Classification) for the 2001 census. The analysis utilizes data from the 1996 and 2001 PUMF. Analysis focuses on the 2.7% and the 2.8% probability samples of the 1996 and 2001 censuses, who were over eighteen years of age the year before the Census was taken, had worked at least one week the year before, and resided in Canada except the Maritimes and the Territories.[1]

FINDINGS

As Table 1 shows, there existed in 1995 important differences in the social class composition both between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents, as well as within Aboriginal people, especially when the gender dimension of class is examined. Aboriginal people were more likely to be in the "workers" class, and less likely to belong to any other social class, when compared with non-Aboriginal people. Treating both groups as homogeneous entities, however, conceals the important gender dimensions of class inequalities within groups: for example, if we compare gender groups within the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, we see that whereas non-Aboriginal women are overrepresented in the "workers" class relative to non-Aboriginal males, the reverse is true for the Aboriginal population; however, for other classes, gender patterns are similar for both populations.

Treating all Aboriginal people as a homogeneous population also conceals some minor, but nonetheless noteworthy, differences among identity groups. Single North American Indians are slightly over-represented in the "workers" class (68%) relative to Single Métis (66%) and the Single Inuit (61%); they are also underrepresented in the "semi-autonomous workers," "manager/supervisor" and "petty bourgeois" classes. In the class of small employers, Single North American Indians are very slightly underrepresented when compared with Métis (2.7% to 3.1%), and somewhat overrepresented when compared with Inuit (1%).

Examination of 2000 data (Table 2) reveals that, compared with 1995, there was a shift from the "workers" class to the "semi-autonomous workers" and "manager/supervisor" classes in the non-Aboriginal group. The proportion of individuals in the "workers" class declined (from 56.7% in 1995 to 52.9% in 2000), while increases were observed for the corresponding figures for the "semi-autonomous workers" (from 19.2% in 1995 to 22% in 2000), and manager/supervisor (from 10.7% to 12.4%) classes. There do not appear to be any major gender differences underlying these shifts.

The above patterns, in terms of change from 1995 to 2000, generally hold for the combined Aboriginal population, as upward class mobility was observed in all five class categories. There was an overall decline in the proportion of individuals in the "workers" class (from 68% in 1995 to 66% in 2000; an increase in the "semi-autonomous workers" class (from 17% to 22%); and very minor increases for the "manager/supervisor" (from 8.8% to 9%) and "small employers" (from 2% to 2.7%) classes.

However, gender analysis at the identity group level reveals some small, but noteworthy, differential patterns. The number of Single North American Indian men in the "workers" class increased by 0.6% from 1995, whereas representation of both Inuit and Métis men in that class decreased. In the case of women, 62.8% of Métis women were "workers" in 2000 (a minor increase of 0.6% from 1995), compared to 62.2% of Single North American Indian women (a decrease of 3.6% from 1995), and 51.7% of Inuit women (a decrease of 2.4% from 1995).

Minor changes are discernible in the remaining classes. Not all gender groups, in all social classes experienced upward mobility, and certainly not equally. For example, 5.8% of Métis women were in the "petty bourgeoisie" class in 2000, an increase of 1.9% from 1995; Inuit and North American Indian women saw slightly smaller increases. Métis men enjoyed minor progress in terms of representation in this class, while Inuit and North American Indian men saw their representation in this class decrease slightly (of 0.8%, and 0.3%, respectively) from 1995 to 2000. Similar patterns are observed for the "small employer" class among men; however among women progress observed for the Métis population was contrasted by losses for Inuit and North American Indian women.

TABLE 1: The Class Composition of Aboriginal People by Sex, Canada, 1995

	CLASSES IN %[i]				
	WORKERS	SEMI-AUTONOMOUS WORKERS	MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS	PETTY BOURGEOIS	SMALL EMPLOYERS
Single North American Indian n=7,982	**68.0**	**17.3**	**7.8**	**4.0**	**2.7**
Females n=3,736	65.8	23.4	6.0	3.1	1.7
Males n=4,246	70.0	12.0	9.4	4.9	3.6
Single Métis n=4,451	**66.0**	**17.5**	**8.4**	**5.0**	**3.1**
Females n=2,047	62.2	25.5	7.2	3.9	1.2
Males n=2,404	69.2	10.7	9.5	5.9	4.7
Single Inuit n=782	**61.2**	**23.9**	**9.1**	**4.6**	**1.0**
Females n=362	54.1	32.1	8.4	4.3	1.2
Males n=420	67.4	16.9	9.8	4.9	0.9
All Aboriginal [ii] n=13,479	**68.2**	**17.0**	**8.8**	**4.0**	**2.0**
Females n=6,268	64.5	23.8	7.0	3.3	1.4
Males n=7,211	71.5	11.0	10.3	4.6	2.6
Non-Aboriginal n=454,242	**56.7**	**19.2**	**10.7**	**7.7**	**5.6**
Females n=214,856	60.5	22.0	7.7	6.4	3.4
Males n=239,386	53.3	16.7	13.5	8.9	7.6

i Percentages may not always add up to 100% due to rounding.
ii Includes Multiple Aboriginal Responses in the 1996 PUMF and Multiple Aboriginal Responses and Aboriginal responses not included elsewhere in the 2001 PUMF.

TABLE 2: The Class Composition of Aboriginal People by Sex, Canada, 2000

	CLASSES IN %[i]				
	WORKERS	SEMI-AUTONOMOUS WORKERS	MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS	PETTY BOURGEOIS	SMALL EMPLOYERS
Single North American Indian n=8,586	**66.6**	**18.5**	**8.7**	**4.3**	**1.9**
Females n=4,121	62.2	25.5	7.2	3.9	1.2
Males n=4,465	70.6	12.1	10.1	4.6	2.6
Single Métis n=4,923	**65.8**	**14.6**	**9.4**	**6.0**	**4.1**
Females n=2,269	62.8	20.2	8.0	5.8	2.9
Males n=2,654	68.4	9.9	10.4	6.2	5.1
Single Inuit n=806	**59.3**	**25.3**	**9.4**	**5.0**	**1.0**
Females n=379	51.7	34.4	8.3	4.4	1.1
Males n=427	66.0	17.2	10.3	5.4	1.0
All Aboriginal [ii] n=14,651	**65.8**	**17.7**	**9.0**	**4.9**	**2.7**
Females n=6,927	61.7	24.3	7.7	4.6	1.7
Males n=7,724	69.5	11.7	10.2	5.2	3.5
Non-Aboriginal n=468,832	**52.9**	**22.0**	**12.4**	**7.5**	**5.1**
Females n=222,695	55.2	25.6	9.6	6.5	3.2
Males n=246,137	50.8	18.8	15.0	8.5	6.9

i Percentages may not always add up to 100% due to rounding.
ii Includes Multiple Aboriginal Responses in the 1996 PUMF and Multiple Aboriginal Responses and Aboriginal responses not included elsewhere in the 2001 PUMF.

CONCLUSIONS

Application of the Wright class structure schema to data from the 1996 and 2001 PUMF on Individuals reveals some notable differential patterns between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, as well as among Aboriginal identity groups and between men and women. First, Aboriginal people are overrepresented in the "worker" class and underrepresented in all other classes. Second, whereas non-Aboriginal women are overrepresented in the "worker" class relative to non-Aboriginal men, the opposite is true for Aboriginal women and men. Aboriginal men are more likely to be workers than Aboriginal women. This pattern holds within all three Aboriginal groups examined. And third, there exists significant class-gender variations between and within Aboriginal groups, such that treating Aboriginal people as a homogeneous group for analytical purposes distorts the diverse realities faced by North American Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples.

It is necessary to recognize that, for the most part, these findings reflect other analyses of gender and/or identity group differences in well-being; the relatively higher socioeconomic standing of the Métis identity population, for example, has been extensively documented (Hull 2004; see also paper by Guimond elsewhere in this volume), as has the counter-intuitive findings with respect to well-being of Aboriginal women (Cooke and Guimond 2006). It would be interesting to see additional research efforts dedicated to determining whether class structure analysis can shed some light on some of the contributors to these differences.

What is undeniable is the fact that application of the ethnic deficit model to analysis of Aboriginal inequality does researchers, policymakers and Aboriginal people a great disservice. In masking important gender and identity differences, the deficit model inhibits effective analysis while perpetuating negative stereotypes and attitudes that inevitably colour the political discourse. This should be seen as unacceptable to all, regardless of one's background or ideological bent. While class structure analysis may not be the only available alternative to the ethnic deficit model, it is this author's hope that social policy formation and implementation recognize the danger in failing to recognize the inequities within Aboriginal populations that are underscored through consideration of social class relations.

NOTE

[1] The geographical areas excluded from the PUMF (Maritimes and Territories) files place limitations on the number of Aboriginal people in the samples, especially the Inuit. In addition, there were 264 Multiple Aboriginal responses in the 1996 PUMF and 336 Multiple Aboriginal responses/Aboriginal responses not included elsewhere in the 2001 PUMF. Given that there also exist missing cases in several variables involved in this analysis (Class of worker, Occupation, Sex, Aboriginal Self-reporting, etc.), the percentage distribution of classes among the various categories may by slightly affected. Any discrepancies, however, are minor and do not seem to affect the overall picture of class distribution by sex among Aboriginal people.

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