



Social Distance Divides Groups

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In sociology, the concept of “social distance” refers to a feeling of separation or actual social separation between individuals or groups. The greater the social distance between two groups of different status or culture, the less sympathy, understanding, intimacy, and interaction there is between them. In this respect, social distance is a part of the status-role structure of a society and functions to maintain ethno-racial stratification and hierarchy.

Early in the twentieth century the sociologist E. S. Bogardus invented the “Bogardus social distance scale” as a technique for scaling attitudes to measure the social-psychological distance between various racial and ethnic groups. People were given a series of graded categories and asked to indicate the closest social intimacy they would accept with each group: (1) exclude from my country, (2) admit only as a visitor to my country, (3) admit to citizenship, (4) admit to employment in my occupation, (5) admit to my school as a classmate, (6) admit to my street as a neighbour, (7) admit to my club as a chum, (8) admit to my family through marriage.

In the Bogardus scale, social distance was gauged in a direct correlation to the scale of society’s social systems – from the national level, down to the institutional level, down to the community level, to the neighbourhood organization level, and finally the level of the family. The lower the numbered category corresponding to the larger social system indicated the higher the social-psychological distance between the ethno-cultural groups. So, for instance, if an individual stated that an individual of another race or ethnicity should be (1) excluded from my country, it evidenced a strong aversion to, or repudiation of, that specific race or nationality. If an individual stated that an individual of another race or nationality could be (8) admitted to my family through marriage, this indicated close social intimacy and relatively equal status between the groups.

The concept of social distance is still often considered an important measure of social stratification and status hierarchy in Canadian society. However, in the interim between Bogardus and today, social distance has become primarily a covert rather than overt social phenomenon. That is, in our contemporary and more complex society, social distance is often hidden and obscured by expressed attitudes and opinions, and not always revealed by them. Consequently, in 21st century society, sociologists who study social distance as an indicator of ethnic and racial hierarchy recognize there is no necessary unity between attitudes and outcomes.

For instance, an attitudinal survey conducted in 1990 by Decima Research Ltd. showed that 90 percent of Canadians agreed with the statement, “All races are created equal.” Yet, while Canadian attitudes may conjure up images of a cohesive and egalitarian diversity, in a recent population study of ethnic neighbourhoods, Statistics Canada found that ethnic mini-cities are on the rise in this country, raising concerns that immigrants and visible minorities are becoming isolated from the rest of the community.

According to the StatsCan study and “isolation index”, there were only six ethnic enclaves in Canada's three largest metropolitan cities in 1981, but the number jumped to 77 in 1991 and 254 in 2001. The report also found that in conjunction with the social distance of ethnic mini-cities, visible-minority neighbourhoods are more likely to experience higher unemployment and lower income levels than other neighbourhoods.

Similarly, in a study on mate selection in the 21st century, featured in the on-line issue of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, researchers found that mainstream mating choices “seems to be based on a preference for long-term partners who are similar to one's perception of self.” This tendency toward homogamy not only serves to preserve the ethno-racial status quo, it is a direct contradiction to the prevailing folk-theories regarding dating and mating in North America which are based on the idea that opposites attract or that people look for someone who ranks high in child-rearing qualities. Instead, the sociological data indicates that a bigger factor in marriage quality and stability is similarity in personality traits. In short, contemporary social science has now come to the incontrovertible empirical conclusion - even though attitudes often emphasize the importance of difference there is a kind of tyranny of the status quo in mainstream society - people like to marry people like themselves.

In a workplace study conducted in Toronto in 1985, researchers Frances Henry and Effie Ginsberg sent out two actors with different skin colour and/ or accents and virtually identical resumes to apply for various jobs. In both face-to-face interviews and approaches over the telephone, Whites received three job offers for every job offered to visible minority applicants. And visible minority applicants were five times more likely to be told that the job had been filled when a subsequent White applicant was invited for an interview. In addition, telephone callers with accents, particularly those from South Asia and the Caribbean, were often screened out when they phoned about a job vacancy.

Similarly, in another study in 1991, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) conducted an experiment to examine institutional discrimination in employment agencies. The Association randomly selected agencies in four cities in Ontario and asked whether the agencies would agree to refer only White people for jobs. Eleven of fifteen agencies surveyed agreed to accept discriminatory job orders

What does all of this tell us about social distance in Canadian society?

It tells us, in terms of contemporary ethnic and race relations in the new millennium, Canada seems to be becoming more “colour receptive” at the attitude level, and more “colour coded” at the activity level, particularly as it relates to the distribution of valued resources. Today most Canadians believe that all races are created equal, and the dominant White majority are typically open to residency and citizenship and commingling with and among other ethnic and racial minorities at the more general levels of society. But these studies indicate that the this same dominant majority do not want minorities to marry into their families, and they also resist the admittance of minorities to the higher occupational structures in the work world.

Still one must wonder, would the typical White Canadian male let a male of colour marry his daughter rather than concede any equality in the workplace?"