

17 MARCH 1967

FOOD HABITS AND NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF MINORITY GROUPS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Chairman : MISS D. F. HOLLINGSWORTH, OBE, BSc, FRIC, MIBiol, *Ministry of
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Great Westminster House,
Horseferry Road, London, SW 1*

The nature and extent of minority groups in Britain

By J. H. WESTERGAARD, *London School of Economics and Political Science,
University of London*

Introduction

'Minorities' can be of many kinds. Their diversity in part reflects the diversity of meanings attributed to the term. As defined often by sociologists, for example, a minority is a group subjected to systematic discrimination in many areas of life. Individuals identified as members of the minority are treated as inferior, and lacking full rights of social citizenship, merely on the strength of that identification. The normal rules of the society, formal or informal, are suspended or modified in application to them. In this sense, a 'minority' may even comprise a numerical majority of the population. Minority status is a matter of social position, not of statistical weight. The study of minority groups, so defined, is clearly part and parcel of the more general study of social stratification, and of the distribution of power in societies.

Undertones of this kind of definition of minorities cannot be entirely excluded in the present context. Unorthodox habits of living—and of eating—may help to set apart a group which is the victim of discrimination. The 'odd' is easily stigmatized as 'wrong'. Moreover, social segregation—especially if accompanied by economic deprivation—will tend to reinforce the deviant modes of life of the minority, and thus seem to confirm the hostile stereotypes which go with discrimination against it. Nevertheless, though they cannot be ignored, issues of this kind are presumably not the primary focus of today's discussion. Instead, I take it, the term 'minority' for our immediate purposes is intended to refer 'simply' to sections of the population whose food habits differ (or may differ) from some national norm—irrespective of whether such deviance is linked with lack of privilege.

The word 'simply' has to be qualified by inverted commas. For one thing, if there is a national 'norm', what is it? And of what kind—a statistical norm, for example; a socially prescribed norm; or one that embodies medically defined standards of adequate nutrition? These, no doubt, are questions that will be taken up in other contributions. They do not entirely exhaust the initial difficulties. There are variations in diet which, if regarded as 'deviant', still reflect only the force of circumstance

in an unequal society: variations in consequence of income and household composition, such as those which have pointed to the crude material handicaps with which many large families continue to be burdened. In general, variations in diet directly associated with economic circumstances appear to have diminished. Indeed, this is to be expected—not because wealth has become markedly more evenly spread; but because, with a continuing rise in overall levels of living, the effects of persistent economic inequalities are displaced from food consumption to other forms of expenditure. Even so, some variability remains in dietary patterns, which is plainly the direct product of financial circumstances. Other continuing differences in the composition of diets as between one occupational group and another, which cannot be wholly explained by reference to income and household composition at a single point of time, suggest the effects of variations in typical life cycles and career prospects, and of historically conditioned ‘subcultural’ variations in styles of life. Directly or indirectly, however, such divergences in patterns of diet reflect the ramifications of a class structure which is so central and established a feature of British society that the connotations of ‘atypicality’ associated with the term ‘minority’ hardly apply.

I shall therefore take ‘minorities’ for our purposes to mean sections of the population with a fairly recognizable cultural identity—whether voluntarily adopted or imposed on them by the society at large—which is not just a consequence of the economic, and immediately related social, positions of their members. Such minorities may have distinctive food habits, reflecting their cultural separateness rather than sheer force of circumstance. Whether in fact they do so is another matter. For while it is possible, within varying limits of certainty, to identify some of the main minorities of this kind, little if any solid information is available (so far as my own knowledge goes) about their dietary patterns. Other contributors may, however, be able to provide relevant data—whether for particular minorities, *in toto*, or (as I suspect is more likely) for subgroups within some of them.

The most important of such ‘minorities’ are probably of four kinds: regional and local ‘subcultures’; various cults, sects and societies whose members may voluntarily have adopted distinctive—and sometimes perhaps distinctly ‘odd’—dietary habits; religious groups; and ethnic minorities. Since I know of no systematic information about the two former categories, I shall have to ignore these, and concentrate on religious and ethnic minorities.

Religious groups

Paradoxically, least is probably known—in any save rather crude terms—about that category of ‘minorities’ which in aggregate is the most numerous, the religious groups. There is no centralized and standardized collection of data even on their numbers. Only once—in 1851—has a nation-wide count of places of worship and attendance at services been undertaken; and then only on a ‘voluntary’ basis, though in association with the official census of population (Mann, 1852–4). Of the very few local censuses of importance, the last major one—for London—was carried out in 1903 (Mudie-Smith, 1904). The various churches and denominations generally compile figures of membership, affiliation or attendance; but differences

between them in the methods and measures used complicate comparisons and the presentation of an overall view. Finally, scattered data are available from sample surveys conducted at intervals since the second world war.

In one sense, and in strictly statistical terms, all religious groups in Britain are minority groups. Criteria of formal enrolment or committed membership vary considerably between the different churches and denominations, and the figures available in any case are of varying degrees of reliability. But if we accept the criteria of full membership recognized by each of the main religious bodies in its own case, and accept its own estimate of numbers, aggregate membership in this sense during recent years has comprised little more than some 20–25% of the population. Of this total, the Church of England has accounted for 7–8%; the Church of Scotland for about 3%; the major Nonconformist denominations (with the Methodists as the largest) between them for another 3%; small Protestant sects and Jews each for rather less than 1%—and the Roman Catholics, according to the basis of calculation used, for between 8 and 12% (Argyle, 1958; Wilson, 1966; Spencer, 1966). By the criterion of fairly regular weekly attendance at religious services (as reported by respondents interviewed in sample surveys), overt religious commitment is confined to a still smaller proportion of the population—some 14–15% of adults—with the proportionate share of the different churches and denominations differing little from their proportionate share of total ‘membership’.

Other measures show a much more widespread sense of religious identification—but one that is, by the same token, vague and no doubt both theologically and culturally indeterminate. Upwards of 90% of adult respondents in postwar sample surveys have claimed ‘affiliation’ to one religious group or another; about 70% have professed a ‘belief in God’; some 45% have expressed faith in the efficacy of prayer, or have said that they prayed fairly regularly in privacy. Civil marriages still comprise only about one-third of all marriages. (Argyle, 1958; Wilson, 1966.) Measures of this kind, however, cannot be used to identify religious groupings having a distinctive character and ‘communal identity’ of their own. Symptomatic of the indefinite nature of the religious commitment implied by such indices is the fact that those bodies showing the greatest discrepancy between numbers claiming ‘affiliation’ and numbers of ‘members’ defined by more rigorous criteria are also those which, on other grounds, must be considered to have only a loose hold on the loyalties of the bulk of their supporters—the Church of England, in particular, which can count about half the population as affiliated to it (and still solemnizes nearly one in every two marriages), although no more than 7–8% of the population are regarded as ‘members’ in a fuller sense; and to a lesser degree, the major Nonconformist denominations, to which some 15% of the adult population claim ‘affiliation’.

With the exception of some of the very small Christian sects (numerically too insignificant to be accurately counted in the usual national sample surveys), and of the recently growing but still proportionately small numbers of Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems (to whom I shall refer later, in discussing ethnic minorities), only two of the main religious groups in any way constitute culturally distinct minorities—Roman Catholics and Jews.

Of these two, the Roman Catholics are unique in forming the only major religious group to have been growing steadily for a number of years, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of total population. All others (those associated with recent immigration from Asian Commonwealth countries apart) have been losing strength. It is possible to challenge the criteria of 'membership' used in Roman Catholic estimates of their own numerical support as excessively generous. But of the trend there can be little doubt—the percentage of all marriages solemnized according to Roman Catholic rites, for example, rising from 4% in 1908, and 5½% in 1924, to nearly 12½% in 1962; and the ratio of Roman Catholic infant baptisms to all live births rising from under 8% in 1911, and about 9% in 1924, to 16% in 1963. Two related factors can account in very large part for this growth of the Roman Catholic minority, though their contribution cannot be stated with absolute precision: the relatively high fertility of Roman Catholic married couples and, especially, immigration from Ireland, which has increased in recent years. Increased immigration from Ireland has also tended to underline the long-standing socio-economic diversity of the Roman Catholic population in Britain, and the continuing 'over-representation' of manual and unskilled occupations within the Roman Catholic minority, even though Irish immigrants now enter into a greater range of jobs than in the past. (Spencer, 1966; Jackson, 1963.)

The Jewish minority—at least those Jews affiliated in some way with Jewish organizations and institutions, together with their families—has been estimated in recent years at about 450 000, or rather less than 1% of the total population, of whom over half are said to live in the London area. The basis of such estimates is uncertain, as are the criteria (religious, cultural, organizational) by which 'Jewishness' is defined. But the estimates are roughly consistent with the proportion of respondents who in sample surveys have identified themselves as Jews. The growth of the Jewish community over the last hundred years or so stems largely from two periods of refugee immigration—from Eastern Europe in the years leading up to, and around, the turn of the century, and from Central Europe, especially Germany, during the 1930s. Concentrated 60 years ago, in large measure, in a few districts and low-paid trades, Jews have moved both 'outwards' (to suburban areas) and 'upwards' (into professional and other non-manual occupations, where their numerical strength exceeds their proportionate representation in the population at large). Seeking no converts, and subject to 'leakage' on a scale which cannot be measured, religious Jewry is no doubt now declining; but the continuing contribution of Jewish cultural influence to British life extends well beyond the limits of the minority as defined by religious criteria. (Lipman, 1954; Krausz, 1964; Prais, 1964.)

Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities can be counted more easily than religious minorities—even though, in counting them, we have to rely largely on sources which distinguish by country of birth or origin, rather than by those features—skin colour, language, customs, faith—by which the society at large recognizes them, and sets them apart. Their numbers have grown in recent years. This increase—commonly exaggerated

(and often assumed to strain national resources by sheer weight of numbers, although the contribution to our population growth from the balance of external migration in fact has been negligible)—has produced panic reactions at all levels, and discriminatory restrictions on immigration paralleling, in spirit and motivation, the restrictions introduced nearly 60 years earlier in response to Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Reactions to the arrival of the 'new' migrants, however, have also helped to produce improvements in our sources of information.

By far the most important of these (indeed, for most purposes the only adequate source to date) is the population census of 1961. True, the census data have limitations. The count of minority group numbers necessarily excludes those born in this country of parents born overseas; but it includes at the same time those, now resident here, who were born overseas of British-born parents. It is possible that some minority group members escaped the net of the census enumerators; and it is certain that the new minorities were underrepresented in the special 10% sample enumeration, from which a good deal of the more detailed information derives. In general, the effect of such limitations—though it cannot be measured—may have been somewhat to understate the disadvantages facing the newcomers. Even so, the information now available is incomparably more accurate and comprehensive than the gossip and guesses which constituted most of what earlier passed for 'fact'. And with this new information—the result of collaboration between the Census authorities and university research groups (among these, especially the Centre for Urban Studies at University College London, on whose continuing analyses most of what follows is based)—myths have been confronted with facts.

The overseas-born population of England and Wales grew by some 700 000 between 1951 and 1961—from less than 4% of the total to just over 5%. Migrants born in the Asian, African and Caribbean countries of the Commonwealth—coloured and white—accounted for nearly half this increase. Yet in 1961, they still comprised only 1% of the total population—and only one in five of all immigrants from outside Britain then living in the country. For all the imaginings of establishment, press and public, four in every five of the immigrant population were born in countries with a predominantly white population. They included nearly 600 000 Europeans of Continental birth—very many, refugees from Poland (Zubrzycki, 1956; Patterson, 1964) and Central Europe who had arrived less than a generation earlier; and almost 900 000 Irish-born immigrants, whose numbers had grown by little short of a quarter million between 1951 and 1961 (Glass, 1965*a*). Since then, the 'new' immigrants born in the predominantly coloured countries of the Commonwealth have increased to just over 1.5% of the country's total population, about 850 000 in Great Britain as a whole. The largest contingents among them are migrants from the Indian subcontinent, some 400 000, and from the West Indies about 300 000. They now comprise a rather higher proportion of the immigrant population, perhaps one in four. Yet they remain, in Ruth Glass's words, 'a minority even among minorities'. They are still outnumbered by the Irish—though the continuing flow of migration from Ireland since 1961 cannot be estimated with sufficient accuracy, as it is exempted from the restrictions of the Commonwealth

Immigrants Act of 1962. (Glass, 1965*b*.)

The new language of 'respectable prejudice', in which 'immigrant' has become a synonym for 'coloured', thus bears no relation to the facts. And the stereotypes which accompany both prejudice and conventional liberal counter-prejudice attribute a unity to the new immigrant populations that is in no greater correspondence with reality. Such unity and similarity as they may have is imposed on them only by their treatment, at the hands of the larger society, as if they were all alike. They include West Indians from very diverse Caribbean territories, the great majority speaking no language other than English, many bringing with them an emotional identification with Britain that meets little response from the natives (Glass, 1960). They include Gujarati-speaking Hindus from India and East Africa, Sikhs from the Punjab, Bengali-speaking Moslems from Pakistan—many of these, unlike the West Indians, from rural areas; many initially hoping to return home after some years; most, like the West Indians and long-distance migrants generally, from the middle rather than the lower levels of their societies of origin, and often with relatively good education (Desai, 1963). Above all, their distribution in British society—residentially and occupationally—shows a range and diversity that strikingly contradict the single identity bestowed on them by the 'public mind'.

Of course, the 'visibility' of the immigrants from the Commonwealth countries of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean exposes them readily to discrimination in the housing and employment markets, over and above the disadvantages facing all migrants in our cities. The newest arrivals, in particular, the most insecure, are effectively excluded from those sectors of the housing market—public and private—which provide adequate standards of accommodation. Instead they have to compete with other migrants for the 'holes and corners' to be found in the 'zones of transition' of our cities—single 'furnished' rooms in bed-sitter districts, decaying subdivided houses in 'twilight' areas (Glass, 1965*a*; Rex & Moore, 1967). In their search for employment, they face both colour bars and colour quotas—if to a degree, and with variations, which have still to be accurately documented. New immigrants from the West Indies have been shown to be exposed to consistent 'down-grading' in the employment market here, by comparison with the jobs they held at home (Glass, 1960). Even so, Asian and Caribbean immigrants are not nearly so concentrated geographically—at least as yet—or so homogeneous in economic status, as is usually assumed. In London in 1961, for instance, only about 10% of the people in these groups were then living in census 'enumeration districts' (very small areas, with average populations of no more than 600 people) in which they comprised over 15% of all residents. And more than half of them lived scattered, in districts where they formed less than 8% of the total (Glass, 1965*a*). Their 'visibility', of course, inflates impressions of their concentration. So does the fact that, as they are young and have fairly high fertility rates, their children are especially visible in the schools of those districts of 'transition' where the native-born population itself has few children—visible as 'coloured', though the diversity of educational promise and handicaps among these children corresponds to the cultural and linguistic diversity of their experience. Occupationally, too, the new migrants appear to be spread

throughout the British socio-economic scale. They are disproportionately represented in jobs of a semi-skilled or unskilled kind. Yet many are in skilled and non-manual jobs; considerable numbers are in professional occupations, including the medical services not least. Indeed, socio-economic 'polarization' of the various 'new' immigrant groups has been accentuated by the further tightening of immigration restrictions during the last couple of years (Glass, 1965*b*).

The new ethnic minorities are thus diverse, not only by origin, language, customs and religion, but diverse, too, by their experience and position in British society. They have in common only the label that is attached to them by virtue of their skin colour, and the handicaps which this label imposes on them at all levels of the society. Their heterogeneity indicates a need for caution in any attempts at generalization about their styles of life—including their food habits.

REFERENCES

- Argyle, M. (1958). *Religious Behaviour*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Desai, R. (1963). *Indian Immigrants in Britain*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Glass, R. (1960). *Newcomers: the West Indians in London*. London: Centre for Urban Studies and Allen & Unwin.
- Glass, R. (1965*a*). In *London's Housing Needs*. [R. Glass and J. H. Westergaard.] London: Centre for Urban Studies.
- Glass, R. (1965*b*). *The Times*, 30 June, 1 July.
- Jackson, J. A. (1963). *The Irish in Britain*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Krausz, E. (1964). In *Jewish Life in Modern Britain*. [J. Gould and S. Esh, editors.] London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lipman, V. D. (1954). *Social History of the Jews in England, 1850-1950*. London: Watts.
- Mann, H. (1852-4). *Census of Population 1851: Religious Worship*. (British Parliamentary Papers, 1852/3, vol. 89; 1854, vol. 59.)
- Mudie-Smith, R. (editor) (1904). *The Religious Life of London*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Patterson, S. (1964). In *London - Aspects of Change*. [Centre for Urban Studies, editor.] London: MacGibbon & Kee.
- Prais, S. J. (1964). In *Jewish Life in Modern Britain*. [J. Gould and S. Esh, editors.] London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rex, J. & Moore, R. (1967). *Race, Community and Conflict*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Spencer, A. E. C. W. (1966). In *The Committed Church*. [L. Bright and S. Clements, editors.] London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Wilson, B. (1966). *Religion and Secular Society*. London: Watts.
- Zubrzycki, J. (1956). *Polish Immigrants in Britain*. The Hague: Nijhoff.

Social and economic implications of minority food habits

By J. C. McKENZIE, *Office of Health Economics, 162 Regent Street, London, W 1*

'Minority food habits' is something of an ambiguous phrase and I propose to begin this paper by defining the field which I shall be examining. Several years ago Professor Yudkin and I (Yudkin & McKenzie, 1964) defined food choice and food habits in the following way:

Food choice—the food selected by an individual at a given time.

Food habits—the sum of the food choice of an individual constituting his total diet.