**CHAPTER 5**

RACE AND ETHNIC VARIATIONS

**CHAPTER FOCUS**

This chapter explains the social construction of race and ethnicity, the impact of European colonization upon native cultures and families, and the ecological contexts of contemporary racial and ethnic minority families, including African-American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American families.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

1. **Meanings of Race and Ethnicity**
   1. Historical Context

*Race* is a socially constructed classification system that assumes that physical differences represent genetic, biological, and psychological capabilities and predispositions, while *ethnicity* refers to people from different cultural backgrounds. Racial and ethnic minority groups have been affected differently by their histories, and families have adapted to meet the challenges they face. Historically, minority and majority cultural groups have differed in terms of collectivism/communalism, familism, and patriarchy. *Assimilation* refers to the level of integration into existing social systems, while *acculturation* refers to adoption of dominant cultural values.

* 1. Ecological Context

Differences between racial and ethnic groups are derived from their original cultural differences, as well as their experiences in the U.S. and their current ecological environments. They are affected by such ecological factors as *social class, prejudice, discrimination*, and *segregation*.

1. **AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES**
   1. Historical Context

The African-American population was the largest racial-ethnic minority group in the United States until 2001, when they were surpassed by Hispanic Americans. African-Americans have unique historical and social experiences, and have been the source of a number of recent social issues such as busing, segregation, job discrimination, quotas, affirmative action, and interracial marriage. Three significant social transitions of African-Americans have been the transition from Africa to the United States; slavery to emancipation; and the movement from rural/Southern to urban/Northern areas.

* 1. Socioeconomic Context

Increasing numbers of African-American families are moving into the middle class. The traditional model of the African-American family was based on negative stereotypes of lower-class families, including out-of-wedlock births, broken homes, domineering females, and males with low self-esteem. In recent years, African-Americans have realized tremendous gains, but considerable disparities still exist between Blacks and Whites in employment, income [Table 5.1], and education level [Table 5.2]. As these factors improve, family life among African-Americans becomes increasingly stable.

* 1. Patterns of Family Life

African-American families are extremely resilient. Two patterns of family life have been described by family scholars, although much of the research until recently focused on problems—not strengths—of African-American families. These patterns include: 1) female-headed families with males who come and go (and who may struggle with unemployment and incarceration) and two-parent families with a stably employed male [Figure 5.1].

1. **HISPANIC AMERICAN FAMILIES**
   1. Historical Context

The Hispanic American population includes people of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, South and Central American, and Spanish origin. The Hispanic American population is the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority population in the U.S. Three characteristics of Hispanic American families are: 1) *Collectivism/communalism*—The incorporation of friends and extended family members into the lives of parents and children; 2) *Familism*—High levels of obligation and responsibility to family members; and 3) *Patriarchy*—Emphasis on male leadership (*machismo*) and female subordination (*marianism*).

* 1. Socioeconomic Context

Socioeconomic conditions vary widely between Hispanic groups with Cubans being the best off financially and Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans having higher rates of poverty [Figure 5.3]. Income differences are related to work/employment factors and family structures/female headed households. National policy discussions often fail to include poverty among Latinos/Hispanics.

* 1. Patterns of Family Life

Hispanic families fall between African-American and White Americans in percentages of both married couple and single parent families. Female-headed families are more likely to be poor; while among two-parent families male-female roles are becoming less traditional. Levels of extended family integration are higher for Hispanic Americans than for White Americans.

1. **ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILIES**
   1. Historical Context

Asian American families are comprised of a variety of ethnic groups with very diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Some have been in the U.S. for generations and are well-established, while others are recent immigrants. The Asian American experience has been affected by such diverse factors as: immigration laws (e.g. The Chinese Exclusion Acts of the 1880’s); discrimination and prejudice against Japanese Americans during WWII; and the experiences of SE Asian war refugees following The Vietnam War.

* 1. Socioeconomic Context

Asian Americans are better educated than the population as a whole, and this translates into family incomes higher than that of any other group, including White Americans. These data obscure the fact that while many Asian Americans are doing well socioeconomically, there is wide variation among the different Asian American ethnic groups.

* 1. Patterns of Family Life

As a group, Asian American families are characterized by: high marriage rates; low divorce rates; strong kinship associations; high levels of elder care; and children who tend toward cultural assimilation. Intermarriage with non-Asian American groups is increasing.

1. **NATIVE AMERICAN FAMILY SYSTEMS**

Similar to other ethnic families, Native American families are made up of hundreds of distinct groups (nations) with differing cultures and languages. The Native American population is increasing, due to: rising birth rates; reduced infant mortality, and greater numbers identifying as having Native American Heritage. Forty percent of Native Americans in the U.S. live on tribal designated areas, reservations, or trust lands.

* 1. Historical Context

Native Americans were the most disrupted of any minority group in the United States because of the following factors:

* + 1. Tribal lands were forcibly taken and others franchised to Christian groups for proselytizing;
    2. Educational systems were designed to separate children from families and instill non-native values; and
    3. The federal government attempted to break up tribal landholdings and turn Native Americans into individual landowners and taxpayers.
  1. Socioeconomic Context

Native Americans have a lower life expectancy than other groups in the U.S. due to high rates of infant mortality, suicide, disease, psychological disorders, accidents, and alcoholism. They are more likely to drop out of school, and thus to work in low-paying jobs. This, in turn, results in a lower median family income and poorer quality housing.

* 1. Patterns of Family Life

In 2007, 58.6 percent of all Native American family households were comprised of married couples, lower than any other group except African-Americans. In general, Native American families are known for: high rates of interracial marriage; strong kinship ties; extended family support networks; less rigid gender roles; and higher status for elders.

LECTURE LAUNCHERS, CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, AND ADDITONAL RESOURCES

* + 1. Break students into four groups (one for each of the racial/ethnic groups discussed in this chapter), and have them visit the website [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) and prepare a brief report on their group. Once they have had time to gather data, allow each group to briefly present a summary of their data, and then discuss their findings in the context of the material in this chapter. You might ask questions such as:
       1. How was the status of your group affected by history?
       2. How are they affected by the current socioeconomic and ecological context in which they exist?
       3. How do their situations affect their families?
       4. How are the groups similar? How do they differ?
    2. Have students view the film, *Precious* (2009), and discuss whether it challenges or reinforces stereotypes about African American women. Or, have students watch the film, *The Blind Side* (2009) and discuss whether it challenges or reinforces stereotypes about young African American men.
    3. Instruct students to visit these websites prior coming to class. You can have them prepare written answers to the questions posed and submit the work, or have them share their answers in class to generate discussion. To explore the controversy concerning interracial adoption in the United States, go to [www.baprc.org](http://www.baprc.org) to learn about the Black Adoption Placement and Research Center. This organization is dedicated to recruiting Black families to adopt Black children in need of homes. Why do members of this organization believe it is so important for Black children to be adopted by people of the same race? Now go to [www.adopt.org](http://www.adopt.org) to learn about the National Adoption Center, an organization dedicated to increasing the adoption of racial and ethnic minority children. Compare these organizations’ mission statements, noting the similarities and differences in the strategies used by each organization to accomplish their goals. What problems do you think might develop in cross-racial adoptions? To what extent should efforts be made to place children with foster and adoptive families of the same race and/or ethnicity?
    4. Consult Janet Cosbey’s article, “Using contemporary fiction to teach family issues” (*Teaching Sociology*, 1997, volume 25, number 3) for suggestions on including novels as required reading for your students. Assign a contemporary novel by an African American writer who deals with issues of marriages, families and intimate relationships (such as Toni Cade Bambara, Connie Brisco, Bebe Moore Campbell, Pearl Cleage, Eric Jerome Dickey, E. Lynn Harris, or Terry McMillan). It is important that the instructor who assigns this novel provide enough historical background to allow students to fully comprehend the social context in which the story develops. Some of the questions that students might be asked to consider as they read include:
       1. How are Whites and Blacks portrayed over time? What role does race play in each character’s identity development? Why is cultural identity more salient for some characters than for others?
       2. How are men and women portrayed? Which characteristics are attributed to the individual’s personalities, and which are defined as developing in response to social conditions?
       3. How would you describe the relationships the women in the novel have with each other? With their children? With the men in their lives?
       4. What strategies do the characters use to challenge the problems they encounter due to structural conditions such as racism, sexism, and poverty?
       5. Does the novel draw on any popular stereotypes? If so, which ones? Does this mean that the stereotypes are true?
    5. Have students conduct a critical analysis of how ethnic minority families are presented in popular media. Ask them to pick a particular racial/ethnic group and a certain form of media (such as movie, television show, or music video) and answer the following questions in a 2-3 page typed, double-spaced paper:
       1. Which racial/ethnic family are you examining?
       2. What media source are you using?
       3. What is depicted?
       4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this depiction?
       5. What stereotypes are presented? Which stereotypes are challenged?
       6. What does this media site teach us about families from this ethnic/minority group?
       7. If you could change this site to make it more positive, what would you do?
    6. Instruct students to visit these websites prior coming to class. You can have them prepare written answers to the questions posed and submit the work, or have them share their answers in class to generate discussion. Go to [www.us-english.org](http://www.us-english.org) to learn why some groups support a movement to adopt English as the official language of the United States. Go to [www.nabe.org](http://www.nabe.org) to learn why other groups support and promote bilingual education. This exercise highlights the interconnectedness of families, educational institutions, and the law and provides opportunities for discussing ethnocentrism and xenophobia.
    7. View one of these movies, all of which focus on intergenerational relationships in the context of competing cultural belief systems. Discuss the strategies that the characters use to manage the tension between their parents’ values and expectations and their own desires and experiences. Another option is to watch selected excerpts from more than one film to compare and contrast the experiences of different U.S. ethnic minority groups.
       1. *Eat Drink Man Woman* tells the story of a widowed Chinese American father’s attempt to honor tradition while forging meaningful connections with his “Americanized” daughters.
       2. *Saving Face* examines three generations of a Japanese family—a young woman who tries to hide the fact that she is a lesbian; her divorced mother who has become pregnant; and her disapproving, traditional grandfather.
       3. *Bride and Prejudice* is an update of Jane Austen’s novel. An Indian mother seeks grooms for her 4 daughters, and confronts American culture and prejudice in the process.
       4. *Real Women Have Curves* examines a Latino woman’s struggle between her own aspirations and those of her parents.
       5. *Smoke Signals* examines a Native American son’s journey to reclaim the ashes of a father who had little to do with his upbringing.