

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



2 Race and Family

America is one of the world's most racially diverse countries, and becoming more so each year. As you can see from Table 1.1, in 2000 White Americans, who are *ethnically* diverse, represented 69 percent of the U.S. population, whereas Americans of color accounted for 31 percent of the population. By 2050, assuming that fertility rates, the national origins of immigrants, and the rate of immigration remain stable, White Americans will constitute only a slim numerical majority. In fact, due to persistent segregation, White Americans are already a minority in California and in numerous counties around the country.

Some people fear this growing diversity; others view it as the creation of a multicolored montage. Either way, the fact remains that learning about one another—both our commonalities and differences—and interacting with each other on equal footing will benefit all Americans and future generations, enabling society to successfully sustain itself.

Table 1.1 Population of America 1990, 2000, and 2050^a by Race and Ethnicity

	1990 Number	1990 Percentage	2000 Number	2000 Percentage	2050 Number	2050 Percentage
Total Population	248,709,873	100.0	281,421,906	100.0	419,854,000	100.0
Non-	188,128,296	75.6	194,552,774	69.1	210,283,000	50.1
Hispanic						
White						
Hispanic	22,354,059	9.0	35,305,818	12.5	102,560,000	24.4
Black	29,216,293	11.7	33,947,837	12.1	61,361,000	14.6
Asian & Pacific Islander	6,968,359	2.8	10,476,678	3.7	33,430,000	8.0
American Indian & Native Alaskan	1,793,773	0.7	2,068,883	0.7	—	—
Some Other Race	249,093	0.1	467,770 ^b	0.2	22,437	5.3
Two or More Races	—	—	4,602,146	1.6	—	—

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Commerce (2001a); U.S. Department of Commerce, (2003c), Table 15

a. The 1990 census did not include the option to check multiple races. The 2050 projections also do not include the multiracial or the American Indian and Native Alaskan categories.

b. In 2000, the vast majority of "Some other race" would have been categorized as "Hispanic."

As a sociology professor, I am occasionally asked why a separate course on race and family is necessary. After all, I also teach a general family course, so couldn't I incorporate related race data into that one? On the surface this seems merely a pragmatic question; but underlying it are assumptions that all American families vary only superficially, that they are all similarly impacted by current events and policies, and that the ways in which we vary merely reflect differences of personal choice and have little import. In other words, race doesn't or shouldn't make a noteworthy difference in the family experience.

On the contrary, adding race to any discussion of societal trends often reveals new elements or layers of understanding that would have otherwise remained obscure. Let me give two examples to illustrate. In my sex and gender course, I ask the class to describe some stereotypes of women. Students usually list many of the following adjectives: submissive, weak, emotional, irrational, vain, low self-esteem. But if I specify the request in terms of race or ethnicity—such as stereotypes of *Black* women—several adjectives change. Usually, “strong” or “aggressive” replaces weak and submissive. For reasons I will discuss in Chapter 6, Black women are frequently associated with “attitude” or high self-esteem.

Another topic of recent interest in the United States is eating disorders. Most Americans immediately think of anorexia or bulimia, which are 5 to 15 times more common among White women than Black women (Striegel-Moore et al., 2003). The primary explanation for the rise of these disorders is America's obsession with thinness, an obsession that is particularly common among White women, perhaps because they are the ones most likely to see women like themselves (only thinner, yet with ample bosom) reflected in the media.

Once again, overlaying race on the eating disorder issue changes the contours of the discussion. First, the definition of eating disorder broadens to include obesity caused by overeating or bingeing. African Americans, particularly women, have higher levels of obesity than do Whites. Obesity is higher among women of color because both are associated with low income. Low-income people tend to have more stress, less education about nutrition, less access to expensive organic and fresh foods, and fewer exercise venues, such as health clubs, tennis courts, and safe neighborhoods for jogging. When Striegel-Moore et al. (2003) controlled for socioeconomic class, they found that the rates of extreme disorder behaviors, such as vomiting, were nearly equal among affluent Blacks and Whites.

Second, the causes of eating disorders expand when race is included. One study (Thompson, 1992) that included women of color found that an obsession with physical appearance was only one possible cause. Among racial

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minority women, eating disorders also serve as (inadequate) psychological strategies to cope with poverty, discrimination, or sexual abuse.

These two examples illustrate that when race is unspecified, the subject (woman) is often assumed to be White (Landrine, 1985). Because Whites have been the majority in America, they are treated as the standard, the generic norm, as has frequently been the case with gender norms. For instance, news articles used to specify the gender of a professional, such as “the *female* doctor” or “the *female* attorney.” If the article referred only to “the doctor” or “attorney,” the reader usually visualized a man. Likewise, race, and the different life experiences that attend people of color in America, often needs to be denoted. Otherwise, people often assume the White experience is everyone’s experience.

Until recently, the vast majority of research on families focused on White middle-class respondents. Therefore, Chapter 3 (the history chapter) and any generic references to the American family or to “national averages” largely reflect the White experience. Therefore, this book includes no specific chapter on White families. Whenever possible, however, specific statistics for White families are used for purposes of comparison.

Some scholars have expressed concern that comparing every racial minority group to Whites only buttresses the perception that Whites are the standard by which everyone else should be measured. Comparison and contrast, however, are essential elements in scientific inquiry. Let me offer an example to illustrate how making comparisons enables more in-depth analysis. If my fifth-grade daughter’s teacher reports to me that my daughter reads at the fifth-grade level, I could say, “That’s great” and leave it at that. But if the teacher provides a comparative overview of the performance of the whole class, indicating where my daughter’s scores rank relative to her classmates, I might discover that all the other students are reading at higher levels. In and of itself, that reading gap wouldn’t prove that a problem exists, but it would lead me to ask questions that I wouldn’t otherwise ask: Does my daughter need glasses? Is the teacher treating her differently than she or he treats the other students? Are all the other students just smarter than my daughter? Does she not like reading? Did I not read to her enough as a toddler? Are all the other families using tutors?

Aside from making me look like a paranoid parent, the point of this example is that making comparisons prods us to ask questions and delve more deeply. Moreover, when race is the subject, we are inevitably talking about equity and fairness. Getting a sense of whether and why one group’s experience is different from another’s necessitates some comparison. Therefore, this book uses a comparative approach so that the reader can see both similarities and differences among America’s racial-ethnic groups and, more important, can understand and interpret those differences.

Unfortunately, I cannot consistently compare *all* racial-ethnic groups on *all* aspects of family life. Because Asians and Native Americans are relatively small proportions of the American population and are very diverse within their racial groups, less research and fewer data sets have included these groups. More research has focused on Black and/or Hispanic respondents, but frequently not within the same study, so sometimes it is impossible to describe or compare the same aspects of family life across racial-ethnic groups.

Overview of the Text

Rather than merely describing each racial-ethnic group's family style in separate chapters, this book employs an integrated structural approach. Chapter 2 gives the reader an overview of various structural factors—historical, economic, and demographic—that impact family life. Understanding how these factors work and the likely effect they have on families will provide the reader with analytic tools to use when she or he encounters racial-ethnic families not addressed here.

Chapter 3 gives a brief overview of why and in what ways American family life has changed over the past 400 years. This historical look is intended to illustrate that families change not only because individuals change their attitudes or values, but also because they must adapt to circumstances beyond their control. This chapter will also help the reader understand that some perceptions of past American families are more fantasy than fact.

Chapter 4 reviews concepts common in anthropological studies of family systems throughout the world, from simple tribal societies to complex, post-industrial societies. More important than just learning the definitions of such concepts is appreciating the myriad of family structures, marriage forms, and child-rearing styles that have all successfully nurtured generation after generation of humans.

Chapters 5 through 8 explore specific aspects of family life—family structures, gender roles, and intergenerational relations—describing their varied manifestations across racial groups. Chapters 9 through 12 examine the historical experience and the current social status of major racial and ethnic groups in America. Obviously, one chapter cannot do justice to the history of each group; the focus here is on specific historical experiences that impacted the family life of each group and a brief overview of the group's socioeconomic status, common types of family structure and traditions, and trends in divorce, fertility rates, outmarriage, and so on. Chapter 13 concludes the text with a focus on acculturation, and multi- and interracial aspects of family relations, such as interracial marriage, transracial adoption, and multiracial

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identity. The percentage of multiracial people in America is increasing, causing related issues to rise to the forefront of American life and politics.

Discussion of Key Concepts

In most discussions, it helps to ascertain whether all discussants are defining their terms similarly. Frequently, friends can find themselves feuding over an issue, only to discover later that they actually agree on the overall principle, but they were using specific terms differently. This is particularly true when the discussion is about race. For example, I have witnessed arguments on television talk shows over who can be racist. Frequently, people of color on the show assert that only Whites can be racist, and Whites retort that anyone can be racist. The argument is often caused by the discrepancy in their definition of “racism.” Many scholars define racism as discrimination by institutions and individuals who have the power to make policy. In America, those with such institutional power are mostly White. Whites, on the other hand, commonly use *racism* as a synonym for *prejudice* (anyone can be prejudiced to one degree or another), and they apply the term *racist* only to those who exhibit extreme behaviors, such as members of the Ku Klux Klan, Skinheads, or individuals who commit racial crimes. If the discussants in this case recognized their varied definitions, they might find they agree more than they presume. Therefore, the next section is devoted to clarifying terms used throughout this book.

Race

People often think of race as a biological concept. Throughout history, however, the concept of race has been a slippery one, mutating over time and space. Most sociologists now speak of race as a “social construction,” meaning that people, usually unwittingly, define and redefine a concept so that it denotes something different in one society from another or in one era from another. For instance, in centuries past, people spoke of the “human race.” In the 1800s and early 1900s, social scientists spoke of the French race, the American race, or the Jewish race (Dworkin & Dworkin, 1999). At various points in history, scientists classified humans into 150 different races, and many of you probably have heard the Sunday school hymn that categorizes humans into four racial groups: “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and Yellow, Black and White; they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Modern science now rejects the existence of distinct groupings of pure races. If pure races existed in the past, their biological borders are now blurred by centuries of intermixing.

Some have suggested, therefore, that the word “race” is useless and should be discarded. I would argue, however, that for centuries people acted on and lived their lives as if race had biological certainty. Many societies created policies based on race, and years of living under those policies created more social differences among “racial” groups than probably existed in reality. For decades, American society acted upon a “one-drop rule,” which stated that anyone with any African or Negro ancestry would be considered and treated as a Black person. Those treatments included a myriad of Jim Crow laws that justified segregation in schools, neighborhoods, marriage, social services, and employment. Years of abiding by these policies prevented minorities from accumulating wealth and cultural capital that could be passed on to future generations (Oliver & Shapiro, 1999). Therefore, race, whether or not existing in reality, has had a real impact on the organization of societies and the lives of individuals. This book will continue to use the word “race,” keeping its limitations in mind.

Ethnicity

People associate race with people of color, forgetting that White is a race too. White Americans, because of their majority status, often define themselves more in terms of ethnicity and overlook how race affects their lives.

Ethnicity refers to a person’s cultural heritage. Frequently, but not always, ethnicity derives from a territorial association. That is, Italians hail from Italy, Australians from Australia, Brazilians from Brazil. But territorial boundaries change throughout history, so certain ethnic groups may no longer possess a legally bounded territory. The Kurds, for instance, live primarily in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria; there is no country called “Kurdistan.” Likewise, ethnicity is not synonymous with citizenship or nationality. Kurds born in Turkey are Turkish citizens or nationals, though they may not self-identify as ethnically Turkish.

Unlike race, which prioritizes physical features, such as skin color and facial features, ethnicity refers to cultural elements—language, religion and other values and beliefs, dress, food, music, traditions, and holidays. Ethnic categories are not consistent in their cultural dimensions. That is, many, but not all, Asian Indians practice Hinduism as a religion and speak Hindi. Some Koreans are Protestant, whereas others are Buddhist or Catholic.

Because of the growing recognition that ethnicity and race are largely social constructs, the U.S. Census Bureau has in recent years allowed respondents to self-identify their racial and ethnic categories. Prior to 1960, census takers used certain criteria, such as physical features or blood quantum, to determine in which racial and ethnic category to place people. Since the first

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census in 1790, the racial and ethnic categories have adjusted to account for new immigrant groups, new ways of thinking about race and ethnicity, and the growth of interracial and interethnic mixing. For the first time, in 2000, the census allowed respondents to choose more than one racial category for their identity. This acknowledged the reality of racial intermixing in America, but it made life more confusing for social scientists who rely on census data. The census data used in this text usually is based on the figures for the respondents who chose only one racial category (more than 97 percent of Americans chose only one race).

Racial-Ethnic Labels

As the above discussion implies, race and ethnicity are not separate; they overlap. Black Americans have a culture that is partly generic American and partly their own developed through years of segregation. For instance, we speak of Black music or a “White way of acting.” We also know that Black Americans have a culture that is different from that of Black Africans. Every individual has a race and an ethnicity, sometimes several. Therefore, I frequently use the term “racial-ethnic” to acknowledge the intersection of both elements.

In addition, for each specific group, I use racial-ethnic labels interchangeably to acknowledge the diversity of opinion within each group about which label is preferred. For instance, some people prefer the African American label to acknowledge their ethnic origins in Africa. Others prefer to be called “Black Americans,” sometimes because their African origins seem distant to them or because the term “Black” arose in the 1960s as a way of acknowledging pride in their skin color. The terms “Negro” and “colored” had been used previously, but, as words often do, those terms acquired a negative connotation and were replaced by *Black*. Every label has its limitations. For instance, White Africans whose families have lived in various African countries for generations don’t know what to call themselves upon arrival in America. “African Americans?” Also, many so-called African Americans are recent immigrants from non-African countries. Despite these drawbacks, I will use Black and African American interchangeably.

The census defines *Hispanic* as an ethnicity, not a race. Consequently, to distinguish Hispanics from Whites in data, the government and academicians frequently sort Hispanics into a separate category and refer to the remaining Whites as “non-Hispanic White.” This is frequently done for Blacks as well, but the majority of Hispanic Americans identify themselves as *White*, so the overlap between Black and Hispanic is small.

As with the Black and African American labels, I switch between *Latino* and *Hispanic*, which for some people carry different political connotations. Hispanic emphasizes the Spanish heritage, whereas Latino highlights the South or Central American origin. Moreover, many people of Latino or Hispanic origin prefer the label of their specific ethnicity; that is, they would prefer Mexican American (or Chicano) or Cuban American.

Similarly, Americans often lump all Asians into one category, but most Asians don't think of themselves as Asians until they arrive in the United States. They think of themselves in terms of their specific country or even in terms of a specific region in their country. Nevertheless, for practical purposes, when I'm making generalizations I use the term Asian American. The category Asian frequently includes Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders as well.

Native American, American Indian, indigenous people, or First Nations will be used interchangeably, but again keep in mind that many Native Americans see themselves primarily as part of their specific tribe (Cherokee, Lakota Sioux, Apache, etc.). Data on American Indians usually include Native Alaskans too.

Generally, I use the terms White and non-Hispanic White synonymously. The census includes people of European descent and also of Middle Eastern or North African descent in this category, despite the fact that the Middle East is geographically part of Asia and many North Africans are dark skinned.

Minority and Majority

Minority and majority denote the percentage of a population. The minority is 50 percent or less of a population, whereas the majority is at least 51 percent of a population. Racially speaking, White Americans are the majority because they currently constitute about 69 percent of the U.S. population.

These terms, however, carry political connotations as well. Politically, the majority, regardless of its actual numbers, possesses the most societal power, owns a disproportionate share of society's resources, and frequently is upheld as the standard to which minority groups are compared. On occasion, a numerical minority is the political majority. For instance, for many years in South Africa, White South Africans were the numerical minority, but they held economic and political power.

As mentioned earlier, it is forecasted that White Americans may become a numerical minority toward the latter half of this century. Whether that demographic shift results in a redistribution of political and economic power remains to be seen.

Family or Kin

These terms may seem self-explanatory, but as mentioned in the preface, the way we define family or kin has a number of political consequences. If families are defined by their legal relationships, the people included in that definition usually acquire more social privileges, such as access to tax deductions, health insurance, social subsidies, particular types of housing, and so on.

The U.S. government, for purposes of the census, defines families according to legal and biological relationships and also in terms of co-residence. Two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption *and* are living together are considered a family household. The census usually breaks family households into married-couple households (with and without children under 18) and male-headed and female-headed households (with and without children under 18). Although the government recognizes that people do have nonresident relatives, the census doesn't attempt to count all those relationships.

People living alone or with other non-related people, such as roommates or cohabiting homosexual or heterosexual couples, are considered non-family households. So your grandmother who lives alone may be your kin, but the census counts her as a nonfamily household.

While recognizing biological and legal relationships, many social scientists study families in terms of their social qualitative relationships, particularly because in a number of societies (more so in the past than now), few formal bureaucratic mechanisms existed to legalize a marriage or adoption. Therefore, social scientists often define families according to their relationships of exchange. When interacting individuals exhibit mutual dependence and exchanges of tangible (money, child care, possessions) and intangible (love, respect, and family roles) goods or services over an extended period of time, they may be considered a family. With this broader definition, social scientists recognize a form of kin they call *fictive kin*, which refers to family-like relations with non-related people. These can be formalized roles, such as the person who is appointed as a godparent for one's child, or more informal ones, such as my friend Pam who my daughters call "Auntie Pam" or your friend Paul who is "like a brother." In this text, I use the term fictive kin broadly to also include family members who have taken on an additional role. For instance, one's aunt and uncle may become one's godparents, or one's grandparents may take over the role of parents.

No one family model works for everyone; many factors contribute to a "successful" family. Moreover, no one analysis of any racial-ethnic family fully encompasses the variation existing within each racial-ethnic group by socioeconomic class, region of residence, educational levels, and individual

uniqueness. This text describes major family patterns and trends exhibited by each major racial-ethnic group represented in America and provides analytical tools for understanding why those patterns and trends exist and change over time.

Resources

Books and Articles

Frankenberg, R. (2000). Whiteness as an “unmarked” cultural category. In K. E. Rosenblum & T.-M. C. Travis (Eds.), *The meaning of difference: American constructions of race, sex and gender, social class, and sexual orientation* (pp. 81–87). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

The author interviews 30 White women about what it means to be White.

Thompson, B. W. (1994). *A hunger so wide and so deep: American women speak out on eating problems*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Women from various backgrounds reveal that obsession with thinness is not the only reason for eating disorders.

Video

Adelman, L. (Executive Producer). (2003). *Race: The power of an illusion*. [Motion picture]. (Available from California Newsreel, Order Department, P.O. Box 2284, South Burlington, VT, or at <http://www.newsreel.org>)

This three-part documentary scrutinizes the concept of race from biological, historical, and political perspectives.

Websites

<http://ssw.unc.edu/jif/>

This is the site for the Jordan Institute for Families, sponsored by the social work department at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<http://www.leveragingdiversity.com>

This website has information about various cultural practices, communication behaviors, and holidays for different racial-ethnic groups.

<http://www.search-institute.org/>

This website is sponsored by a nonprofit group in Minneapolis, and publishes research, often done in conjunction with the YMCA, on family issues.

