

1-1-2008

Family (Encyclopedia entry)

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FAMILY

Over the past century, racial/ethnic minorities have grown as a proportion of the U.S. population. More

attention has been given to their family experiences, and the lenses through which their families are viewed have been modified as scholars have recognized that U.S. family life is not and never has been monolithic or stagnant.

The family is frequently a site of cultural and political controversy because it is often viewed as the guardian of societal values or the womb in which each generation is created and molded. A society's sustainability is assumed to be dependent on the quality of its families. Consequently, governments generate incentives and disincentives, sometimes quite severe, privileging or disallowing certain family practices. Past policies have prohibited interracial marriage and used sterilization to prevent reproduction by poor or disabled people. Today, some states deprive women of public assistance if they have additional children, and other states constrict the grounds for divorce.

Then and now, such policies disproportionately affect families of color because racial minority families historically experienced higher levels of divorce, nonmarital births, and single parenting than did White families. However, during recent decades, these trends have increased at a faster rate among White families, so that the gaps between the races are in many cases smaller than they were previously. For instance, nonmarital births have been increasing for all racial/ethnic groups. In 1980, 57% of African American births were nonmarital, whereas 9% of White births were nonmarital. In 2004, nonmarital births accounted for 69% of Black births and 25% of White births, indicating a 21% increase for Blacks but a 178% increase for Whites. In terms of teen births, in 1991 African Americans had the highest rate of teen births, but during the ensuing decade they experienced the steepest decline, so that by 2002 Hispanic American girls had the highest rate. These changing trends are reflected in the way in which scholars have approached the study of families of color.

From Culture to Structure

Until recently, researchers analyzed these trends among families of color within a "deprivation" or "pathology" framework. Juxtaposed against an idealized model of White middle-class families, explanations for the differences centered on an analysis of cultural deficiencies that itself substituted for previous biological/genetic explanations. Illustrative of the cultural deprivation approach was Daniel Moynihan's pivotal 1965 Department of Labor report on Black

families in which he argued that pathologies within the Black family had caused high rates of crime, delinquency, and poverty. Moynihan built on the work of E. Franklin Frazier, who had written the first historical analysis of Black American families in 1932. Frazier had focused on the effects of slavery and economic exploitation, suggesting that African American cultural moorings had been destroyed, resulting in a predominance of “matriarchal” households. Although Moynihan’s conclusions were not unlike Frazier’s, Moynihan’s analysis shifted the focus from historical and structural factors and pointed instead to the Black family as the cause of social problems in the Black community. In truth, both scholars focused on poor Black families and overlooked the fact that two-parent families accounted for the majority of Black households until the 1980s. Around the same time, Oscar Lewis studied the Mexican community, concluding that generations of poverty had changed their cultural values and that now those values (e.g., fatalism, hypermasculinity, immediate gratification, low aspirations) were themselves the cause of problems the community faced. Instead of advocating societal reform, these conclusions suggested reforming families themselves, and many viewed this as “blaming the victim.”

In response, scholars turned to macrostructural approaches highlighting the social forces under which families of color must operate. Rather than assuming that family forms and relations are merely artifacts of cultural preferences, recent scholarship gives priority to socioeconomic, demographic, and historical factors. This more ecological framework, which combines both individual agency and environmental forces, has changed the discourse on families of color to one of resiliency and adaptation.

A number of family dynamics can be explained better within this structural framework. For instance, extended households may be culturally valued, but their use is more likely explained by socioeconomic and historical factors. Immigrants frequently participate in chain migration, where one family member migrates and is followed by others who temporarily coreside with the first migrant until they get settled. Using these laterally extended households facilitates the migration. Among Asian immigrants, the use of stem families (in which the eldest son and his wife, or all sons and their wives, live in the household of the son’s parents) declines on immigration. The two generations may still coreside, but in the new environment

the older generation more often resides in the child’s home, resulting in a decrease in the elder’s authority. Native-born racial minorities also practice household extension more frequently than do White U.S. residents, but that practice is more common among lower-income families and declines as socioeconomic status rises.

The elderly represent a smaller proportion among racial/ethnic minorities than among the White population, obviously not because cultural norms accord elders less value but rather because life expectancy among racial minorities is lower and because the elderly immigrate less often. Racial/Ethnic minority families are more likely to care for ill elderly at home, but studies indicate that as income rises, nursing home use rises as well. Moreover, racial/minority elders are more likely to act as primary caregivers for their grandchildren when members of the middle generation are unable to do so. To accommodate this growing phenomenon, a number of states have instituted various forms of kin care policies that enable grandparents or other family members to receive state subsidies, as would a foster family, for caring for related children.

Historically Subjugated Groups

Because of their generations of residence in the United States and their historically subjugated position, African and Native Americans exhibit similar socioeconomic characteristics. Although the majority of neither group is poor, and in fact both groups have made significant improvements in education and social class, both still display higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and related family trends than do White U.S. residents and other racial/ethnic minorities. Both groups are known for their resiliency under generations of discrimination, strong ties among extended and fictive kin, and use of fluid family roles and household borders to accommodate the contraction and expansion of kin and resources.

Currently, research on African Americans remains focused on various forms of single parenting and their effects on children. In 2000, 22% of African American households were female or male headed with children (compared with 6.7% of White, 16% of Hispanic American, and 17% of American Indian households). Research conclusions have focused on poverty, low rates of employment among Black men, and low male-to-female gender ratios beginning at young ages to explain the postponement or absence of marriage. As a way of reincorporating fathers and reducing the public

costs of poor and low-income single parenting, both scholarship and government programs have shifted their focus during the past decade to fatherhood identity and involvement in the Black community.

Much less research is conducted on Native American families because of their relatively small population, diverse tribal arrangements, and high levels of biological assimilation due to intermarriage. Native Americans historically exhibited more nontraditional gender roles, such as matrilineality and transgenderism, and these have been highlighted in recent research. Also, persistent health issues and high rates of alcoholism have contributed to high rates of fosterage for Native American children. Recent research has aimed to embed these within a historical context. Along with economic development, resurgence of cultural traditions is frequently suggested as a means to address such problems.

Immigrant Families

Both Hispanic and Asian American families have high proportions of foreign-born members, so immigrant family issues have predominated in research on these groups. In the aggregate, immigrants often exhibit several unusual family patterns. Because of self-selection, immigrant families frequently have better health than would be expected given their higher rates of poverty and often lack of health insurance. As mentioned earlier, they usually have larger proportions of both multigenerational and laterally extended households than do native populations. Transnational parenting, whereby parents immigrate to the United States to earn a livelihood but leave their children with extended family or, conversely, send their children to stay with relatives or friends in the United States to receive a U.S. education, is not an uncommon practice. Because young and middle-aged adults dominate the immigrant profile, immigrant groups usually have younger age distributions that give rise to higher marriage and fertility rates.

In response to this large influx of non-European immigrants, who have not assimilated in the same way or to the same degree as previous European immigrants did, scholars revised the common theoretical framework that was driven by earlier presumptions of inevitable and linear assimilation. Instead, they now focus more on issues of acculturation and biculturalism. In general, most scholars find that racial/minority families do acculturate to some degree

over two to three generations, but it is not necessarily a linear process; rather, it can ebb and flow depending on, among other things, the presence of extended family, ongoing ethnic group in-migration, residential segregation, and discrimination. Acculturation is manifested in some common indicators. Fertility rates tend to decline with each generation. Even first-generation immigrants exhibit lower rates than do their counterparts in their home countries. Divorce rates rise over several generations, and surveys find that attitudes supportive of filial obligation decrease.

Studies on Hispanic and Asian families indicate that the acculturation process can produce intergenerational conflict. The first generation may attempt to inhibit acculturation in the second generation through a process that Monisha Das Gupta referred to as *muse-umization*, whereby the first generation attempts to sustain “old country” traditions in the second generation, even though those traditions may actually be disappearing or modifying in the home country as well. However, on the whole, a strategy (conscious or not) of biculturalism (retaining some of both cultures) appears to be conducive to positive outcomes. Biculturalism mitigates the stress accompanying adaptations required by the demands of a new environment and in some cases has been shown to contribute to scholastic achievement and overall well-being of the younger generation.

Despite some common immigrant experiences, Asian American and Hispanic American families differ in distinctive ways. Asian American families have frequently been referred to as a *model minority* because on average they exhibit higher levels of college education and family income and lower rates of divorce, single parenting, and nonmarital births than do White U.S. residents. This stereotype overlooks the fact that during recent years Asians who choose to immigrate to America are frequently those who already have higher education or who come ready to obtain one, whereas Hispanics who choose to immigrate on average come from lower socioeconomic strata in their home countries.

Both racial labels—Hispanic and Asian—camouflage much within-group diversity. Nearly 67% of Hispanic Americans are Mexican Americans, nearly 9% are Puerto Ricans, and nearly 4% are Cubans. During the past few decades, “other Hispanic” has comprised a growing proportion of Central and South Americans, but little research has been conducted on these latter groups. Despite their cultural similarities in language

and religion, Cuban Americans, with former refugee status, are measurably better off socioeconomically in terms of education, income, and poverty. Their family structure and dynamics reflect these resources: lower fertility, female-headed households, and nonmarital births.

The racial label *Asian American* also lumps a diverse set of ethnicities together. For decades, the largest ethnic groups were Chinese and Japanese; today, Filipinos and Asian Indians have surpassed the Japanese, and at least 20 ethnic groups fall under the *Asian* label. Since the Vietnam War, Southeast Asians have been arriving in large waves. Southeast Asian families on average are poorer and less educated than their East Asian counterparts and exhibit more of the family trends associated with restricted resources.

Multiracial Issues

Finally, coterminous with the continued racial/ethnic diversification of the U.S. population have come increased interracial relations of various sorts. Although still relatively uncommon, interracial marriages have increased and accounted for nearly 6% of all existing marriages in 2000. The majority of interracial marriages involve a White partner. The other spouse is most commonly Hispanic, followed by Asian, Native American and Black. Although most of those in interracial marriages are born in the United States, with the advent of the Internet, locating brides in other countries has become a pastime for some men in the United States as well. Korean women were popular during the 1980s; today, Russia and other former Soviet republics are popular sources (although the latter would not be considered interracial).

Several factors contribute to the likelihood of interracial marriage. Each successive generation is more likely than the first generation to intermarry. In general, those with higher levels of education are more likely to intermarry than are those with lower levels of education (Asians are an exception to this). Racial minorities who attend colleges or reside in diverse settings, where they are less exposed to people of their own racial group, are more likely to intermarry.

These more open interracial relations have given birth to a multiracial movement. In an attempt to measure this population, or at least the saliency of their identity, the 2000 census for the first time allowed respondents to check more than one racial category for their racial identity. Less than 2% of the population did so.

In addition, interracial or transracial adoption has become more common again. References to interracial adoption are generally to adoptions of minority children by White parents rather than to adoptions of White children by minority parents. Interracial adoptions had declined for a couple of decades due largely to the protests of Black social workers and American Indian tribes, who believed that the practice resulted in a loss of culture and identity for the children. However, the predominance of children of color languishing in the foster care system led to a legal reinstitutionalization of the practice during the mid-1990s. Moreover, adoption across borders has proliferated during recent decades, with the popularity of supply countries usually following war or political upheavals. Currently, Chinese girls and Russian children are the most commonly adopted.

As racial/ethnic minorities become a larger proportion of the U.S. population, American family trends will reflect their presence and more research will shed light on the differential experiences of families of color.

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See also Acculturation; Adoption; Aging; Assimilation; Census, U.S.; Child Development; Cultural Capital; Culture of Poverty; Domestic Violence; Familism; Frazier, E. Franklin; Immigrant Communities; Immigration and Gender; Intermarriage; Kinship; Parenting; Rites of Passage

Further Readings

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