ETHNIC FAMILIES IN AMERICA

Patterns and Variations

Charles H. Mindel
Robert W. Habenstein
Roosevelt Wright, Jr.

FOURTH EDITION

Ethnic Families in America

Patterns and Variations

edited by

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To Gloria, lover and friend (CM),
to the memory of Jane Habenstein,
and to the most important friend and companion in my life,
my dear wife, Elaine, and to two other very important women,
my granddaughters, Asia and India Wilcox (RW)

Preface

This is the fourth edition of *Ethnic Families in America.* At the time of the publication of the first edition early in the 1970s, the prevailing view of ethnicity seemed to be that the United States was an assemblage of mostly European ethnic groups who had been forged into new amalgam by means of a great "melting pot." Assimilation as a cultural value, the view that immigrants to this land should somehow give up their strange cultural ways, beliefs, and languages and adopt the "American" way, was dominant. The idea that separate ethnic group identification in the United States was valuable in its own right was only beginning to be appreciated. Competing notions of ethnic pride and ethnic self-determination which challenged the value of assimilation were in their infancy.

These changing views were probably the result of a confluence of historical events. The great civil rights struggles of the 1960s had not only mobilized great numbers of the African-American population but also spawned other liberation struggles as well. The war in Vietnam had, among its many consequences, a profound splintering effect on group consensus in the United States. This conflict had strong ethnic and class overtones, centering around a war with Asians fought disproportionately by poor black Americans; this war produced great tears in the American civil fabric that have lasted even to this day.

An equally momentous historical event centered around changes in the immigration laws. The United States had been largely closed to new immigration after 1924, when a discriminatory law effectively barred immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and Asia. Beginning with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and later with the opening of the immigration doors to Cuban, Vietnamese, Soviet, and Salvadoran refugees, among others, as well as swelling numbers of immigrants who arrived and stayed on illegally, the nature of ethnicity in the United States changed profoundly.

As a result of this transformation and evolution of the role of ethnicity in American life, it was felt that a new edition of *Ethnic Families in America* was

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appropriate. Original authors were recontacted and asked to revise and update their chapters. When they could not or would not revise their chapter or when they could not be reached, new contributors were sought. In several cases, chapters were updated by the editors. A new chapter on the Asian Indian family was added, another nod to the continuing change in the ethnic makeup of the United States of America.

Currently the mood in the country, as reflected in recent changes in the immigration laws and the reductions in benefits to legal immigrants, is on one of those anti-immigrant downturns that has afflicted this country almost from its inception. We can only say that as the story of ethnicity in America continues, we will be here to record the changes.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to this new addition, including all of the authors who tried to meet the deadlines and requests for changes. We would like to thank Jerry Toops for his assistance in background work for this new edition. Portions of Chapter 2 are taken from the author's previously published "The Ethnic Immigrant Family" in S. Queen, R. Habenstein, and J. Quadagno (1984) *The Family in Various Cultures,* New York, Harper & Row.

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1 Diversity Among America's Ethnic Minorities

Charles H. Mindel
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INTRODUCTION

In this, the fourth edition of *Ethnic Families in America*, the opportunity presents itself to take a brief retrospective view of changes in America's ethnic families and explore the continuing role of ethnicity and the ethnic factor in modern-day American life. In the early 1970s, when the first edition of this work was published, the emerging importance and recognition of ethnic group identification in the United States was only beginning to be appreciated. The now-common notion of "multicultural diversity" had not been conceptualized yet, certainly not in the form it is currently. Ethnic politics took on a much different form then, the black civil rights struggle was not a somewhat forgotten memory, and "affirmative action" was still an emerging idea, its political repercussions not yet apparent. The political machines of big northern cities remained still largely under the control of representatives of European ethnic groups.

The Role of Immigration and Ethnic Diversity

In the introduction to our first edition we stated that "most of the large scale immigration to America has ceased." As we shall see, this statement, like many pronouncements about the future, was shortsighted and woefully misplaced. For one thing, it did not foresee the repercussions of the changes in the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, nor did it grasp the impact of the rise in illegal immigration. The world has also witnessed numerous tragic world events, genocide in Cambodia, starvation in Ethiopia, ethnic warfare between the Hutus and the Tutsis, blood feuds between the Bosnians and the Serbs, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. One significant result has been the creation of numerous refugee populations and sizable ethnic relocations.

The impact of the post-1965 waves of immigration with their increasing numbers, shifting national origins, and often illegal status has been unset-

tling for many individuals in older American groups. This sea of new faces is often seen as containing the seeds of new serious social problems for American society or an acceleration of its ongoing breakdown. Talk snow commentators and others express fears that the United States has lost control of its borders, its language, its "American" core values, and, increasingly, its ability to afford the cost of caring for new immigrants.

Of course, the current concerns about the effects of immigration on American values, the economy, and the American way of life are not new. The American public has worried about the effects of immigration almost from the beginning of the settlement of this country by Europeans (surely, the Native American peoples also worried about the influx of these foreigners as well). And almost from the beginning of the settlement of this land, the issues concerning immigration most have remained remarkably unchanged. Longer-established immigrants have almost always been bothered by the cultural distinctiveness of the newcomers. Sometimes this distinctiveness manifested itself in language, other times in religion, or skin color, or unfamiliar family practices. Frequently, more "politically correct" concerns have been expressed about the economic impoverishment of the newcomers and what this might do to the wages of native-born workers. These concerns are also voiced as a fear that the newcomers will become a welfare burden placing undue pressures on the state to provide care and assistance. Thus, current concerns about the effects of large-scale immigration have long echoes into America's past.

Protests and outcries about immigrants with different cultural practices, largely language and religious differences, occurred during the initial periods of immigration into the United States (the colonial period through 1860) and were largely directed against German and Irish immigrants. Even then, governments and citizens were not passive in their opposition. Many policies designed to curtail immigration, such as head taxes on ship captains, were enacted by colonies (Jensen, 1989).

The second great wave of immigration, beginning around 1860 until 1920, saw over 28 million people enter the United States. Most were culturally different from the existing population, had darker complexions, were not Protestant but mostly Catholic or Jewish, and came from southern and eastern Europe rather than northern and western Europe. Significant numbers of Asians, largely Chinese and Japanese, came as well. Although these great masses of people were absorbed into the growing industrial machine that demanded ever more numbers of workers, there were great concerns about the ability of the country to deal with the poverty and kinds of people being admitted. Rita Simon (1985:84) quotes comments from *The Yale Review* during this period, which sound not unlike some of the commentary often heard today and illustrate the attitudes often held by individuals from older ethnic groups:

> Ignorant, unskilled, inert, accustomed to the beastliest conditions, with little social aspirations, with none of the desire for air and light and room, for decent

> dress and home comfort, which our native people possess and which our earlier immigrants so speedily acquired, the presence of hundreds of thousands of these laborers constitutes a menace to the rate of wages and the American standard of living. . . . Taking whatever they can get in the way of wages, living like swine, crowded into filthy tenement houses, piecing over garbage barrels, the arrival on these shores of such masses of degraded peasantry bring the greatest danger that American labor has ever known.

Comments on the social character of the new immigrants were also often heard in the popular media (as quoted in Simon, 1985:85):

> The character of our immigration has also changed—instead of the best class of people, we are now getting the refuse of Europe—outcasts from Italy, brutalized Poles and Hungarians, the offscourings of the world (*Philadelphia Enquirer,* Nov. 29, 1890).

> The swelling tide of immigrants from Southern Europe and the Orient who can neither read or write their own language and not even speak ours, who bring with them only money enough to stave off starvation but a few days, is a startling national menace that cannot be disregarded with safety (*New York Herald,* Nov. 10, 1900).

These remarks reflect a deep strain of virulent racism in this country even beyond the horrific racism suffered by African slaves and their descendants. Chinese and Japanese immigrants suffered great indignities and violence. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 effectively halted Chinese immigration, and the Native American population was either slaughtered or settled on reservations during this period. Although the impetus behind these moves was couched in economic terms, the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Acts of 1921 and 1924 were essentially cultural and racial in nature. Grounded in notions of "Nordic" supremacy, they effectively cut off immigration from all but northwestern European countries until 1965 (Jensen, 1989).

The effects of World War II on emigration cannot be underestimated. After the war, there was a stronger move toward changing the rules of immigration. When the Immigration and Nationality Act was ultimately amended in 1965, many of the more egregious biases were eliminated, quotas were now distributed evenly across countries, and first preference was given to persons wishing to be reunited with their families (although this preference was not accorded to Mexicans until 1976). In addition, exceptions were made for refugees from Cuba (over 600,000 between 1960 and 1990), Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries after the Vietnam War (over 600,000 from 1975 to 1990), and Soviet Jews (approximately 150,000) (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1997). There have also been additional 150,000 refugees from such other countries as Poland, Romania, Iran, Afghanistan,

Ethiopia from 1981 through 1990 (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1996).

These circumstances led to a major increase in the numbers of immigrants to the United States. Since 1960, almost 20 million people have legally immigrated to the United States and an additional 3–5 million are estimated to be in the country illegally. Experts estimate the rate of illegal immigration to be about 250,000 to 300,000 per year (Simon, 1995). These large increases predictably have brought about a new clamor for restrictions, again largely on economic grounds and fears of welfare dependency. Consequently, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 added restrictions on immigration while also allowing a one-time amnesty for illegal immigrants. The result has been a steady decline in immigration during the 1990s, from 974,000 in 1992 to 720,000 in 1995 (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1996).

The economic impact of immigration has been varied. Julian Simon (1995), reviewing a number of economic studies, found that:

> a spate of respected recent studies, using a variety of methods, agrees that "there is no empirical evidence documenting that the displacement effect [of natives from jobs] is numerically important" (Borjas, 1990, 92). The explanation is that new entrants not only take jobs, they make jobs. The jobs they create with their purchasing power, and with the new businesses which they start, are at least as numerous as the jobs which immigrants fill.

If we had been correct in 1976 in our statement that "most of the large scale immigration to America has ceased" then we might today simply be discussing an interesting chapter in the settlement of the United States, where ethnicity becomes an interesting cultural memory. But this continuing immigration into the United States tells us that, on the contrary, ethnic diversity continues to be important in the way people live their lives and raise their families. New immigrant groups are reinvigorating the notion of ethnicity. They use their ethnic institutions to aid them in their struggle to survive in a difficult global economy, where any advantage they can muster helps. They maintain their traditions as they adjust and cope in a foreign land. At the same time, the more established ethnic groups, more assimilated into the larger American culture, use their ethnicity as something to be recalled and celebrated, at festive occasions such as weddings, confirmations, and *bar mitzvahs,* or at more solemn events like funerals. Ethnicity remains important, still providing a source of identity, values, and unity.

In light of these circumstances, we feel that this edition of *Ethnic Families in America* retains its original purpose and role. We seek to examine a wide variety of American ethnic groups, probing the historical circumstances that impelled them to come to this country and focusing on the structure and functioning of their family life to determine or, at least, raise clues about how and why they have been able or unable to maintain

an ethnic identification over the generations. Finally, we look ahead to speculate on what the future has in store for these groups and their constitutive families.

THE CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF ETHNICITY

What does it mean to be ethnic? Certainly, ethnicity can be divisive and destructive, and ethnic ties can evoke some of the worst in humankind. As Greeley (1974:10) states:

> In fact, the conflicts that have occupied most men over the past two or three decades, those that have led to the most appalling outpourings of blood, have had precious little to do with ideological division. Most of us are unwilling to battle to the death over ideology, but practically all of us, it seems, are ready to kill each other over noticeable differences of color, language, religious faith, height, food habits, and facial configurations.

Greeley further points out that

> Thousands have died in seemingly endless battles between two very Semitic people, the Jews and the Arabs. The English and French glare hostilely at each other in Quebec; Christians and Moslems have renewed their ancient conflicts on the island of Mindanao; Turks and Greeks nervously grip their guns on Cyprus: and Celts and Saxons in Ulster have begun to imprison and kill one another with all the cumulative passion of a thousand years' hostility.

More recently, the Serbs and Bosnians in southern Europe and the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda serve as other examples of ethnic conflict. It appears that perhaps the collapse of old colonial empires, the rise of nationalism in the post–World War II period, and more recently the collapse of the Soviet empire have given rise to numerous conflicts at tribal, linguistic, religious, geographical, and cultural levels. The amount of conflict does not appear to be disappearing.

What all these conflicts seem to share is not an ideological character—especially the ideology of modern superpower conflicts, which focus on economic systems and social class—but a concern in some sense with very basic differences among groups of people, particularly cultural differences. There are concerns reflected in these conflicts that apparently are important to people—matters for which they are willing to fight to the death to defend. Clifford Geertz (1963:109) referred to these ties that people are willing to die for as "primordial attachments":

> By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the "givens"—or more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the "assured givers"—

> of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them, the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language or even a dialect of language, and following particular social patterns, These congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer, *ipso facto,* as a result not merely of one's personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by the virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself. The general strength of such primordial bonds, and the types of them that are important, differ from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time But for virtually every person, in every society, at almost all times, some attachments seem to flow from a sense of natural—some would say spiritual—affinity than from social interaction.

These attachments, these feelings of belonging to a certain group of people for whatever reason, are a basic feature of the human condition. They are called *ethnic ties,* and the group of people that one is tied to is an ethnic group. In this general sense, an *ethnic group* consists of those who share a unique social and cultural heritage that is passed on from generation to generation.

Gordon (1964), in slightly different terms, sees those who share a feeling of "peoplehood" as an ethnic group but believes the sense of peoplehood that characterized most social life in past centuries has become fragmented and shattered. This, he suggests, has occurred for a variety of reasons including, in the last few centuries, massive population increases, the development of large cities, the formation of social classes, and the grouping of peoples into progressively larger political units. However, as many other writers have noted, individuals have shown a continuing need to merge their individual identity with some ancestral group—with "their own kind of people." Gordon proposes that the fragmentation of social life has left competing models for this sense of peoplehood; people are forced to choose among these models or somehow to integrate them completely. In America, the core categories of ethnic identity from which individuals are able to form a sense of peoplehood are race, religion, national origin, or some combination of these categories (Gordon, 1964). It is these categories, emphasizing substantively cultural symbols of consciousness of time, that are used to define the groups included in this book.

Ethnicity in America

Since the 1970s, we have seen a growing interest in the value of cultural diversity, ethnic pluralism, and ethnic differences in the United States. As already indicated, this level of appreciation has not always been the case, and some have argued that the reason that a scholarly examination of ethnic dif-

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