CHAPTER 2

Black Families:
Race, Ethnicity, Culture, Social Class, and Gender Issues

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Many assume that American society is made up of a mixture of people of different races, creeds, and religions whose differences are viewed in a positive context. William Graham Sumner (1906, p. 13), however, captured the experience of our common existence in the concept of ethnocentrism. He saw enthnocentrism as reflecting that area of things "in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." Ethnocentric thinking suggests that individuals may view their own culture as the most important way of life in the world and therefore as the context for measuring all other significant experiences and acts. It was such thinking from the majority groups in American society that fueled the black ethnic pride movement witnessed nearly three decades ago.

Ethnocentrism also fosters the myth of the great melting pot and the illusion of color blindness. These myths do not strive to equalize race relations in America, but instead are the hallmarks of racism. The mythological view of the American society as a monolithic whole perpetuates a color-blind dualist perspective and belief system about the social and economic relationships among the masses. The "we" and "they" paradigm is also an outgrowth of this system of thinking (Greely, 1971). This paradigm not only serves to define and refine the life changes among blacks and whites in our culture, but also perpetuates the confusion about the interrelationships between race, ethnicity, culture, and social class. According to Solomon (1976, p. 53), "in a racist society, race tends not only to transcend ethnicity in responses elicited from others in the social system, it tends even to shape the cultural content that defines the group's ethnicity." Despite the predominant influence of race on black American life, the complexity of black family life requires a close examination of the concepts of race,

ethnicity, culture, and social class, as well as gender role and gender identity. This chapter defines these concepts, illustrates their interrelationships, and discusses their implications for assessing and working effectively with black families.

THE CONCEPTUAL DILEMMA

To understand fully the ecological and social realities of black family life, it is imperative to decipher concepts that have been used to both describe and explain the dynamics of the black experience. These concepts are race, ethnicity, culture, social class, and gender role and gender identity.

Race

When people think of black Americans, they immediately think of a racial group. The physical identity and social categorization that is the essence of race determines this predominant perception of blacks in America. Given the history of racial oppression and stigma attached to blackness in this country, this is understandable, but black Americans need to be understood in more than just racial terms. Although this understanding will not come easy, a primary step will be to begin by establishing a context for examining the concept of race.

Race is perhaps the most discussed and controversial of the concepts. It is a misunderstood concept that evokes deep feelings, and it has had the most pervasive effect on the overall functioning of black Americans. Anthropologist Ashley Montague (1964) tells us that few people have a clear and correct idea of what "race" or "a race" is. Definitions of race range on a continuum from denial that race exists to the attempt to define race on an exclusively morphological basis (Brace, 1964). Among those professionally interested in studying race relations—social, behavioral, and political scientists, as well as politicians—there is greater unanimity. For example, social scientists define race as "A group of mankind, members of which can be identified by the possession of distinctive physical characteristics" (Brace, 1964, p. 125). The word "distinctive" in the above definition is significant in that the importance of race is primarily in the perception, attitude, and action of the perceiver (Brace, 1964). It follows that unless differences are clearly and easily perceived, little if any consistency can be maintained in practice. Therefore, it becomes questionable whether the social scientist is studying what he or she actually believes is being studied. In many cases the difference that is perceived may be primarily cultural or historical. For example, culturally, the dress code or the language may be the only distinguishing feature of an East Indian or someone of Mediterranean origin. On the other hand, the slave history of an African American may have resulted in some family members with a white pigmentation, causing them to be indistinguishable from someone from the caucasoid group.

Because "race" is an emotionally laden word that triggers stereotypical,

pejorative images about certain groups of people, and because of the inhumanity that has been practiced in the name of race, several scholars have advocated that the term be abandoned (Brace, 1964; Garbeck, 1961; Montague, 1964). In a more recent discussion of the concept, Green (1982) describes it as useless, that it "serves no purpose other than to make and justify invidious distinction between groups of people." In addition, Green (1982) and McAdoo (1987) argued that the term "minority," which along with race is often used to describe oppressed people, is equally inadequate for describing differences among human beings. Both authors point out that minority status refers to power and privilege, not to numbers. Green further asserts that the term also refers to "the degree to which the individuals who are identified with some group may be denied access to privileges and opportunities available to others" (p. 7). McAdoo's (1987) observation on apartheid in South Africa serves as a powerful illustration of the above points, as well as of how the term is used politically as well as psychologically.

An interesting analogue to these positions is the heated debate within the academic and social community on William Julian Wilson's *Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Numerous scholars believed that Wilson was remiss in his thesis that the vestiges of racial oppression were declining in American society (Pettigrew, 1979; Willie, 1980). But Wilson was not advocating that the concept of race be abandoned. He was making a distinction between the effects of past discrimination based on race and the current effects of race in the economic world. Wilson (1978, p. 11) contends convincingly that, although race was a significant deterrent to the life changes of blacks during the earlier periods of this country, "the economy and the states have shifted the basis of racial antagonisms away from black/white economic contacts to social, political and community issues." He points out: "The net effect is a growing class division among blacks, a situation in which economic class has been elevated to a position of greater importance than race in determining individual black opportunities for living conditions and personal life experiences" (p. 11).

Wilson's critics, especially Charles V. Willie, counterargue that "the significance of race is increasing and that it is increasing especially for middle-class blacks who, because of school desegregation and affirmative action and other integration programs, are coming into contact with whites for the first time for extended interaction" (Willie, 1978, p. 157). It is important to note, however, that others prior to Wilson also saw class oppression as more insidious and destructive than racial oppression in American society. This point could best be illustrated through Greer's observations on racism. For example, Greer (1974, p. 35) believes that racism has been used as a smokescreen to obscure the basic facts of stagnation in the American economic system. He asserts:

> Ethnic-centered analyses serve to perpetuate the illusion of classlessness and the legend of equal opportunity and mobility. It is a pernicious syndrome. In large measure these myths account for the rationalization of poverty in this country through the promise that everybody who is willing and able can eventually make it. In other words, a secular state of grace is instituted that legitimates the existing pyramid of power, encourages competitive and oppressive relationships along the various ethnic horizontals on the pyramid, and diverts attention from the parallel oppression and exploitation of the larger class system.

Solomon (1976, p. 52) tends to disagree with those advocating that the term "ethnic group" should be substituted for "race," and she offers a point of view that is perhaps most useful to practitioners in attempting to understand the influence of stereotypes on policies, programs, and interactional processes. She believes that, in addition to serving as a categorical descriptor of the three major subgroups in the human population, the term has some usefulness in that it refers exclusively to the "physical" characteristics that distinguish the three (racial) subgroups. She further points out:

> The influence of race in interpersonal relationships is almost entirely a function of social attitudes. Thus, demonstrated of the attitude, almost endemic in American society, that there is a connection between racial, i.e. physical characteristics and social behavior and that, in this regard, some races are inherently superior to others, reveals essentially what is meant by the term racism.

Ethnicity

The concept of ethnicity, while extremely popular today, is also confusing and often misunderstood (Isajin, 1974). This is especially so when referring to American blacks. For example, in a discussion on ethnicity, Staiano (1980) raises the following questions about black Americans:

> Can they [blacks] be treated as an ethnic group, albeit one without a territorial base, occupying diverse econiches, and widely dispersed across the "opportunity structure"? [or] Can a group [blacks] which apparently has no unifying institutions, religious forms, customs, and, it can be argued, language, which is partially assimilated into the dominant institutions and centers of power, whose members exhibit a vast array of life styles and political philosophies, and which has evinced a variety of "adaptive strategies" in both rural and urban contexts be thought of in any sense as analyzable in terms of ethnicity? (p. 78)

Staiano (1980) concludes her questioning with the observation that "blacks do not seem to have the 'cultural and social distinctiveness' that is normally thought of as underlying ethnicity" (p. 28).

Staiano is thinking in what Isajin describes as objective terms about black ethnicity while attempting to engender a subjective point of view. According to Isajin (1974, p. 115), an objective approach describes ethnic groups in concrete terms and simply assumes the groups "to be existing as [if] it were 'out there' as real phenomena." On the other hand, "the subjective approach defines ethnicity as a process by which individuals either identify themselves as being

different from others or belonging to a different group or are identified as different by others, or both identify themselves and are identified as different by others." Isajin (1974) attributes this feeling of differentness either to a person's membership in a group with a different background or to the various characteristics of one's background, social class, culture, religion, skin color, and so forth.

The *Social Work Dictionary* (1987) does not include a definition of ethnicity, but the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Sills, 1968, p. 167) gives a definition that combines both the subjective and the objective approach: "An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be, bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture." Max Weber's (1968) definition of ethnicity most clearly reflects the European ethnic experience and might be classified as a subjective definition. According to Weber (1968, 1: 389):

> "Ethnic groups" [are] those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and emigration: this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation: conversely it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. Ethnic membership (*Gemeinsamkeit*) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action, like the latter. In this sense ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity. This belief tends to persist even after the disintegration of the political community, unless drastic differences in the custom, physical type, or, above all, language exists among its members.

A major concern emerges if one were to apply Weber's definition to American blacks: Weber's definition assumes ethnicity to be a belief in common ancestry because of similarities of customs and above all language, and Weber believes that any social organization within an ethnic group is due primarily to the political factor, not to the factor of culture. One could argue that American blacks did not initially speak a common language; nor were they captured from one tribe or state on the continent of Africa and enslaved on one plantation in the United States. A question would therefore be: what accounts for and constitutes ethnic identification among American blacks?

Most subjective definitions, such as Weber's, do not assume that only the political factor accounts for a belief in common ethnicity. The general assumption is that psychological ethnic identification can be made on the basis of several attributes. These attributes may include religion, race, language, and same culture, but instead of standing alone, some attributes can be subsumed under culture or cultural traits—that is, religion or language and the like. On the other hand, race, which refers to physical characteristics, remains on a different level of analysis. If used subjectively, race may be considered a part of a

person's culture. For example, subjective definitions refer to race as part of the individual's self-definition, and if self-definitions of a category of people remain the same over time and space, they become part of a people's culture. Further, if race is viewed in biological, genetic terms, it can be defined as referring to common ancestral origin and thereby included with it.

Ultimately, Isajin (1974, p. 119) argues that religion and race, like ethnicity, require independent definitions of their own and should not be included in the definition of ethnicity. He goes on to say that religion, race, and ethnicity could be subsumed under a more generic "notion of groups with a sense of peoplehood." The glue that ties these categories together is the concept of an involuntary group. This concept implies that a person is born into a group that shares certain cultural traits and becomes socialized into them (Breton & Pinard, 1960). According to Isajin (1974), the concept of involuntary group includes not only ethnicity but also religious groups, racial groups, and social classes. He offers the concept of ethnic culture as the distinguishing element between these categories, with the understanding that members of an ethnic group are not necessarily members of the same religion, class, or race, but would all share basically the same culture.

How, then, does this discussion bring some clarity to the question of whether American blacks constitute an ethnic group? It might be proposed that, while American blacks can be viewed as a group closely linked through the sharing of a common history and experience—in short, its sense of peoplehood—as a group it experiences ethnicity as an ongoing process with social, psychological, and political ramifications. Isajin (1974, p. 121) describes this process as the "emergence of ethnic rediscovery"—that is, the emergence of people from any consecutive ethnic generation who have been socialized into the culture of the general society but who develop a symbolic relation to the culture of their ancestors. Barth (1969) describes this process in a slightly different manner. He contends that people will be identified by others as belonging to one or another ethnic group even if they no longer actively share the cultural patterns with that ethnic group, as long as a link to their ancestors can be made.

Isajin (1974) offers an interesting definition of ethnicity that moves beyond mere descriptions of concrete ethnic group processes to a possible explanation of those processes by combining both the subjective and the objective approach. He states that ethnicity refers to "an involuntary group of peoples who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group" (p. 122). Isajin's definition reflects what Green (1982) describes as a transactional view of ethnicity. In this view, ethnicity is not a permanent, concrete feature of one's identity, but fluid and to some extent manipulable. Green goes on to say that, therefore, "the degree to which a person is 'acculturated' is situational rather than absolute and can be modified to suit the needs of different cross-cultural encounters" (p. 13). This understanding of ethnicity has profound implications for the ethnic-sensitive practitioner. The practitioner must recognize that individual clients can be selectively "acculturated" depending on the situation. For

example, a black client may selectively choose to speak black English or standard English, depending on the nature and quality of a particular relationship. For the effective practitioner, "individualizing the client would require an accurate perception . . . of how the individual manages the symbols of ethnicity in a variety of cross-cultural as well as same-cultural relationships" (p. 13).

Culture

The preceding discussion of race and ethnicity demonstrates that the concept of culture is intricately linked to both concepts. Further, as one examines the implication of the concept of culture for group dynamics among American blacks, an equal amount of confusion and controversy also exists. The central issue regarding black culture has focused on its existence. The debate has been whether or not there is a unique African-American culture.

The controversy apparently had its origin in Gunnar Myrdal's widely acclaimed study *An American Dilemma* (1944). Myrdal asserted that American blacks are "exaggerated Americans" whose roles are a "pathological" elaboration on general American values (pp. 927–930). However, E. Franklin Frazier (1957) is perhaps most quoted regarding his views that American blacks are "not distinguished by culture from the dominant group." Essentially Frazier believed that black culture in the United States was synonymous with "folk culture of the rural Southern Negro or the traditional forms of behavior and values which have grown out of the Negro's social and mental isolation. Moreover, many of the elements of Negro culture which have grown out of his peculiar experience in America, such as music, have become a part of the general American culture" (pp. 680–681). Despite the emergence of critical scholarship supporting the assertion of a positive black culture (see, e.g., Blauner, 1970), the theme reflected in the works of Myrdal (1944), Frazier (1957), Glazer and Moynihan (1963), and Berger (1967) that American blacks have no culture is still evident today (Staiano, 1980).

The issue of whether there is a distinctive black culture is further compounded by various misconceptions evident in American society about ethnicity and culture. Blauner (1970) sheds additional light on this by presenting a sociological model of ethnic group assimilation. The model essentially encompasses two variables: the traditional culture, and the American value and condition. Blauner (1970) describes the process as a one-way and usually nonreversible movement from immigrant extranational status to ethnic group assimilation. However, this model has little or no relevance to the cultural experience of black Americans in that blacks entered this country not as immigrants but as a group of enslaved strangers with different cultural experiences. Enslavement both mitigated against the social and economic progress that accompanied assimilation of other ethnic groups and did not permit group autonomy (see Chapter 1). More important, the enslavement process vitiated those traditional African attributes (see Park, 1950). Despite the spurious acculturation process rendered by slavery, an ethnic group identity and distinctive culture evolved (Blauner, 1972). The essence of such a culture is a more subtle human orientation to problems of existence as ways of being in the world, as ethos or philosophy of life (Blauner, 1972). Thus, culture must be viewed in the sense of the spiritual life of a people as well as material and behavioral aspects. According to this broad-base perspective, all people have a culture.

When we define culture as the essence and the ethos of a people as well as a way of life, it becomes difficult if not impossible to deny the reality of black culture. Within this context, black culture becomes a synthesis of many elements. It reflects what is shared in common with other Americans. As Blauner (1972) points out, it becomes in some ways like all human cultures in the world, and then in other ways is considerably diversified by differences in regions, social class, age, and sex. It is also uniquely ethnic in some other ways.

The essence of black culture is not that it is unlike other cultures. The essential idea here is that different cultures value their common elements differently, insofar as one puts the accent here, another there, and that it is the ordering and the relations of elements to one another that determines the differences between the cultures. Thus, culture is not a static entity, but ever-changing. The backdrop of this process is the continuous and unifying stream in black life which is a combination of Africa, the American south, slavery, poverty, migration, and racism. It is a stream expressed in music, family life, language, love, religion, and countless other manifestations of a people's orientation to the world that constitutes black culture.

The aforementioned broad-base perspective moves us beyond the common misconception that black culture is primarily an "underclass" phenomenon of black people in America (Blauner, 1972; Chestang, 1976; Valentine, 1968). In this negative, pejorative view, the lifeways of black people are seen not as cultural but as merely a reflection of an "underclass" world view. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that poverty and black culture are not to be viewed interchangeably (Valentine, 1968).

The intent here is not to explicate the content of black culture, but it is important to define what is meant by the concept. Essentially, black culture is being defined here as the totality of all the attributes that make up the way of life of a people at a given period in history. Culture can be formally defined as the system of values and meanings shared by a group or a society, including the embodiment of those values and meanings in material objects (Popenoe, 1980). It refers to the characteristic lifeways of a people—the way they think, feel, and behave (Chestang, 1976, p. 99). Yet culture is viewed also as the more subtle human orientation to the problems of existence, as ways of being in the world, as ethos or philosophy.

The Class Controversy

The "class" concept, like culture, is slippery and difficult to define and has been defined in a variety of ways. Generally, the concept is used to describe the social or economic status of a group (Parsons et al., 1961; Weber, 1947). As a social indicator, class most clearly described those members who were ranked

according to social status, prestige, or privilege, based primarily on ancestry, values, and style of life. As an economic indicator, class described members who were stratified or ranked in a hierarchy based on property holdings and other types of economic acquisitions. These two important distinctions highlight two common errors connected to the use of the term "class": (1) the practice of equating "middle-income" with "middle class" and "low-income" with "lower class" and (2) equating "middle class" with occupational position or education. The error in these practices is that income indicates only how much money a person has, whereas social class refers to styles of life, living standards, values, beliefs, behavioral expectations, and communication styles. On careful examination, it becomes evident that the misuse of these concepts blurs the diversity and fluidity that exist within and between different social and economic groupings. For example, while many middle-income people may have "lower-class" values and life-styles, many low-income people may have "middle-class" values and life-styles. A similar analogy applies within the context of equating "middle-class" with occupation. Although occupational position or educational training may enhance one's social status, it does not necessarily relegate one to "middle-class" status. For example, though the common usage is to define white-collar, skilled craft, and operative jobs as "middle-class" jobs, evidence indicates that for many blacks and other minorities these jobs may produce earnings below the poverty level (Hill, 1972; Wilson, 1978).

At this point an important question is: What constitutes the black class structure in this society? Several social researchers have proposed a social class structure of the black community. For example, Hill (1978) and Billingsley (1968), utilizing census, education, occupation, and income data, provided a roughly demarcated social class structure, but they both point out the numerous difficulties connected with paradigms that attempt to describe social stratification in the black community. Both Hill and Billingsley stress that in describing behavioral dynamics in the black community, the class concept is not useful. They emphasize that the indicators of social class are different from those used in the white community, but the definition of social status is equally complex. An example of this complexity in terms of class is reflected in the fact that upper-class blacks comprise families of judges, businessmen, and physicians who would be middle class on the basis of criteria used by whites. Further, a black lawyer, judge, or physician may be rated higher in prestige than a black teacher, nurse, or high school principal in the abstract, but when it comes to community involvement and deference given to them by persons who have a lower social status, this functional social status becomes blurred (Solomon, 1976).

Wilson (1980) offers another point of view on this slippery concept. He defines "class" in economic terms, as a concept that includes "any group of people who have more or less similar goods, services or skills to offer for income in a given economic order and who therefore receive similar financial remuneration in the marketplace" (p. ix). Although he believes that the crystallization of a black class structure is fairly recent (Wilson, 1980, p. x), he utilizes E. Franklin Frazier's classification system to demarcate class structures, contending that on the basis of occupational distribution at the middle of the twentieth century, approximately one-third of the black population could have been classified as either working class or middle class. Wilson includes within this category blacks with white-collar jobs and craftsmen and foremen positions. Since the 1960s and the civil rights movement, the economic status of educated blacks with marketable skills has improved significantly. On the downside, however, statistical evidence and observation reflect a worsening condition for inner-city low-income black families that have few resources and lack education and skills. As Wilson indicates, the black community is increasingly becoming divided into two groups: a relatively prosperous middle class and a poverty-stricken underclass.

Thus, to operationalize a class structure within the black community, very broad lines are required. Anyone concerned with understanding black family life must be concerned with both social and economic stratification. Helping professionals who come in contact with black families would find it more effective to assess social status individually within the context of helping relationships, instead of fitting the family to current usage of the social class definition. Billingsley (1968, p. 45) notes that social class is "completely inadequate and inappropriate for describing behavior, or values, or preferences, or styles of life, or child rearing patterns in the Negro community." It is further believed that the class concept for blacks at this time is best defined in economic terms: income distribution, education, and occupation (Hill, 1978). More recently, Hill (1987) illustrates this point through the classification used by the Tax Reform Act of 1986. To ensure that the able, "average" taxpayer benefited from the reform, Congress classified all taxpayers with income between $20,000 and $50,000 as "middle class." Based on the classification schema offered by Congress, Hill (1987) described households with incomes of $50,000 and over as "upper class," those with incomes between 20,000 and 49,999 "middle class," and those with incomes between $10,000 and $19,999 as "working class," and those with incomes under $10,000 as "poor." Hill goes on to explain that, based on 1984 Census Bureau data, 5 percent of black households are "upper class," 29 percent are "middle-class," 25 percent are "working class," and 40 percent are "poor."

It is important to acknowledge the heterogeneous grouping within each of the four broad categories of income. The Smith family, which is a large extended family, best illustrates this point:

> Mr. and Mrs. Smith were the parents of ten children (five boys and five girls). They were both born and raised in the rural south. Mr. Smith worked for many years as a construction worker in the south before emigrating to the north in search of a better job to support his family. With little more than an elementary education, he worked until retirement in the steel mills of Ohio and Pennsylvania. However, Mrs. Smith was able to attend school sporadically. She eventually dropped out in the fourth year of high school. She was primarily a homemaker, but did some domestic work to supplement the family's income during extreme financial hardship. All of the children graduated from high school, and the six younger children

completed college and graduate school. Among the high school graduates is a postal employee, a bus driver, a disabled veteran, a janitor, and an auto mechanic. Of the six college graduates, one is a lawyer, two are business executives, one a college professor, one a high school principal, and another owns a catering business.

This family not only reflects a diversity of values and life-styles based on education, occupation, and income, but also illustrates the complexity of ascribed and achieved social status within black families. For example, the black community would attribute middle-class status to the Smith family based on prestige that comes with their visibility and standing in the community. The children, especially those with graduate degrees and prestigious occupations, would be considered "upper class," a status achieved through occupation and education.

Gender Role and Gender Identity

Gender role and gender identity are more recent concepts, but because the available literature on these concepts is written from a white, middle-class perspective, the emphasis is not on issues related to the sex-role development of blacks. However, a discussion of such concepts as race, ethnicity, culture, and social class must acknowledge the interrelationship of gender.

In distinguishing between the complex concepts of gender role and gender identity, Condry (1984) describes gender as a primary defining trait that cuts across the physical, cultural, and behavioral levels of development and is in many ways a central feature of identity. Generally, gender role refers to the public manifestations of gender identity. Within this context, a series of behavioral characteristics have been considered appropriate for members of one sex and inappropriate for members of the other sex. For example, women are considered to be emotional, unaggressive, unreliable, and person-oriented, while men are viewed as aggressive, adventurous, relatively unemotional leaders, and more interested in mechanical things than in people. The great extent to which society has internalized such behaviors as uniquely masculine or uniquely feminine has been demonstrated clearly by Boverman and colleagues (1972).

On the other hand, gender identity refers to an individual's personal awareness of himself or herself as either male or female (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Lamb and Urberg (1978) point out that because of the private nature of gender identity, measurement is extremely difficult. The process must be indirect, and projective techniques are frequently used. The examiners' interpretation of the subjects' responses raise serious questions about whether the examiner is measuring what he or she thinks is being measured. The point here is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assess gender identity accurately.

For black families, sex-role socialization is generally approached with the awareness that black children must learn to survive and grow not only in their interaction with mainstream America but also within black communities. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that black parents communicate both

general values and specific role responsibilities to their children. This dual socialization perspective provides the necessary prerequisite for coping with the range of stresses that inevitably face black families as a result of oppression and discrimination. For example, a substantial number of black husbands have indicated that they are capable of effectively carrying out tasks traditionally associated with women—cooking, washing, ironing, sewing, caring for babies, washing diapers, keeping house, and shopping, and so on (Billingsley, 1968; Logan, 1987; Scanzoni, 1971).

Although available evidence suggests a reciprocal task-sharing in black families, the evidence does not fully support the notion that this dual perspective screens out stereotypes and sexist notions about women that are directly related to sex-role socialization in our society. For example, Bell Hooks (1981, pp. 98–99) points out: "While the 60s black power movement was a reaction against racism, it was also a movement that allowed black men to overtly announce their support of patriarchy." Hooks goes on to say, "The strongest bonding element [during this time] between militant black men and white men was their shared sexism—they both believed in the inherent inferiority of women and supported male dominance" (p. 99). Although Hooks is referring to the militant black man, she also believes that some black men have historically been sexist but that today their sexist behavior has taken the form of misogyny (undisguised woman-hating). Hooks attributes this development to the social and cultural changes in attitude toward female sexuality in the larger society.

It is dangerous to generalize Hooks' observations to *all* black men. The practitioner and the educator must keep in mind that it is impossible to speak of "all black men," just as it is impossible to speak of "the black family." Many black men, like men of other ethnic groups, are becoming more sensitized to women's issues (Moore-Campbell, 1986). Moore-Campbell (1986, p. 208) contends, "As women must learn the skills of achieving power in the larger world, men must explore femininity within themselves and use it to improve their lives." Herb Goldberg (1983) points out that men and women have a responsibility to minimize the sexism in each other by working to change behavior that encourages the other person's sexism. Ultimately it is the partners who must create a climate of open communication and encouragement of self-growth.

With the recognition that few men or women have grown up in homes where sexual equality was the norm, it is important that practitioners and educators, regardless of ethnicity, be mindful both of the impact of gender in general on black family dynamics and of the interrelationships between gender and class.

THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE CONCEPTS

An appreciation of the interrelationships between race, ethnicity, culture, social class, and gender as they pertain to black Americans can best be addressed from the perspective of intergroup relations. Within American society there are two

major types of groups: dominant and subdominant. According to Willie (1983), dominant groups in different societies and during various periods in history have assumed a threefold role: (1) they control social organizations; (2) they oppress people by their control of social organizations; and (3) they seldom, if ever, voluntarily share their power and authority with those over whom they exercise control. Willie further argues that subdominant groups constitute the oppressed in a society. Historically, blacks have exclusively occupied a subdominant category in this society. As a result of skin pigmentation, culture, and socioeconomic status, blacks have been denied equal access to those valuable resources within the broader society.

The suppression of blacks by the dominant group occurred through a variety of ingenuous schemes of racial and sexual discrimination, exploitation, and segregation. In the past, these schemes were more blatantly reinforced by elaborate ideologies of racism, but in recent times racist and sexist acts have been more subtle. Most blacks who have benefited from desegregated opportunities have experienced a new type of prejudice that was not present under conditions of segregation.

The living conditions and personal life experiences of blacks illustrate the interrelationships between race, ethnicity, culture, social class, and gender:

1. Regardless of socioeconomic status, they were prohibited from moving to higher-status neighborhoods, as was the norm for other ethnic groups in the total population (Gordon, 1971; Glazer & Moynihan, 1963). The observations of Taeuber and Taeuber (1969) that "the net effect of economic factors [in] explaining residential segregation [for blacks as compared with other groups] is slight" and that "improving the economic status of Negroes is unlikely by itself to alter prevailing patterns of racial residential segregation" (pp. 94–95) still apply today.

2. Black and brown professional and managerial individuals received a median annual income that was 15 percentage points less than that for whites, and educated blacks often have to obtain doctoral degrees to get jobs that are similar to those that some whites obtained with only an undergraduate college education or a master's degree (Willie, 1980).

3. Blacks have been and still are severely disadvantaged by the education system at all levels in this country (National Education Association, 1987; Willie, 1987; Lee, 1985; Staples, 1986; Willie & McCord, 1972). Racial discrimination is a serious hindrance to quality education for black children (*Barriers to Excellence*, 1985), and at colleges and universities blacks are shockingly underrepresented from administration to the faculty down to the lowliest freshman. The reasons cited for this declining trend include such factors as inadequate or nonexistent support for recruitment and retention of blacks in university settings. Charges of discrimination and feelings of a lack of acceptance are often voiced by students and faculty (Farrell, 1988).

4. Because of their gender and race, black women are doubly oppressed,

but if they fall into the poverty category they are triply oppressed by race, sex, and class (*Fact Sheets*, 1986). The oppression of black women is most noticeable in the work force. Historically, black women have been in the work force in proportionally greater numbers than any other group of American women. Yet black women are relegated to the bottom of the pay scale in pink-collar positions, such as clerical workers and waitresses, or in household service positions. Further, for every dollar a white man earns, on average, a black man earns 70 cents, a white woman earns 59 cents, and a black woman earns 55 cents (Carter, 1983; Lewis, 1977).

The above examples are not intended to be inclusive of the range of life experiences that reflect the interrelationships between the concepts under discussion. They simply give the reader a general flavor of the impact these concepts have on the quality of black life.

COMMON STRENGTHS AND LIFE PROBLEMS

Thus, the concepts of race, ethnicity, culture, social class, and gender have a direct impact on the ecological realities (social, psychological, physical, and spiritual) of black Americans. These interrelated concepts have an impact on the life-styles of blacks ranging from the most subtle forces to the obvious. Some of the more obvious examples of these forces are reflected in the educational system, the job market, and the physical and social characteristics of the communities where black Americans live.

In American society, blacks have always viewed education as the vehicle most likely to ensure economic security and upward mobility (Comer, 1987; Hill, 1972), but educational systems not only have failed blacks in the past but also continue to do so (Robinson, 1987). Robinson paints a disconcerting picture of the plight of black students in the educational system: "The full and complex range of crucial issues involving black students, parents, and institutions [issues that are addressed fully in Chapter 7] cannot be overstated" (Robinson, 1987, p. 31). Despite what appears to be a hopeless situation, there is a potential storehouse of opportunities to be found. For example, although black parents are shunted aside by the educational systems, they still care deeply about the educational issues affecting their children and simply need to be tapped as a viable source for change (Hill, 1972; Robinson, 1987).

Employment discrimination against blacks continues across age and the socioeconomic spectrum (see Chapter 11). "Despite modest improvements in economic conditions of black Americans during 1985 and 1986, the Reagan recovery has had such weak impact on blacks that their current labor market conditions are still more depressed than they were at the bottom of all previous postwar recessions" (Swinton, 1987, p. 49). In short, during the Reagan administration black family income declined, poverty rates increased, and the labor market difficulties intensified. According to the geographic profile of employment and unemployment for 1981–1983, the economic status of blacks also differs regionally. For example, in 1985 the midwest region reported the highest

unemployment rates (over 30.0 percent in the past five years, but averaging 23.7 percent) as compared with the south (15.6 percent), the west (15.8 percent), and the north (15.1 percent).

But what accounts for the lack of black economic progress? Is it a result of failure in motivation, competence, or behavior (see Swinton 1987)? Consistent with the discussion in Chapter 1, the answer to these questions lies in an understanding of the historical treatment of blacks in American society as well as the nature and functioning of the U.S. economy.

Several factors have contributed to current economic difficulties: (1) few businesses are black owned, managed, or controlled; (2) blacks have limited opportunities for accumulation of wealth; (3) blacks have been traditionally discriminated against in gaining equal access to nonblack owned, managed, and controlled job situations; (4) blacks have traditionally had lower levels of formal education and training; and (5) there is a lack of available jobs. These factors reflect some very serious and recalcitrant problems for the economic survival of black families. However, researchers analyzing labor market and economic trends believe that a strong national economic policy combined with concentrated black self-help and a renewed commitment from the federal government to support affirmative action will solve the economic difficulties of the black community.

Black families live in diverse neighborhoods ranging from the stately, affluent, and immaculate to varying stages of decay and deterioration. Black communities reflect a variety of life-styles that create different life experiences for the inhabitants based on their ability to gain access to and utilize resources. In other words, level of education and income influences the degree of stress experienced by community residents with respect to the community's economy, political power structure, social agencies, and educational system (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Clark, 1965). In general black neighborhoods may be grouped into two types of spatial configurations: urban and suburban. The urban areas are made up of what Rose (1971) referred to as ghetto cores and fringes, in which blacks constitute a clear majority. Examples of such areas can be found in New York, Chicago, Newark, and Miami. It is important to note that the word "ghetto" evokes images of what is commonly referred to as "urban blight," but the word is often not interchangeable with "slum" and has been criticized as being insulting to black people and to cities (Murray, 1970). The suburban areas may or may not include blacks in the majority. Rose (1971, p. 7) delicately describes black occupation of such areas as sufficient to "hasten the future outmovement of the white population."

Despite the numerous environmental problems and a lack of community cohesiveness experienced by the residents of black communities, there are inherent strengths on two broad levels: (1) the tendency to adopt children informally and to incorporate nonkin into the family household (Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1972), and (2) a pervasive assumption that people are doing the best they can. More generally, there are strong spiritual/religious, work, and high achievement orientations (Hill, 1972). In short, the community residents care about each other and will lend a helping hand, as is manifested by the number of black

clubs, fraternal and other self-help organizations, and political groups ("The Black Middle Class," 1987). It is generally the less affluent residents, those who are candidates for or currently recipients of some form of social service, who are caught in the powerless web of urban life—a life in which businesses, programs, and policies are supervised and determined by people who do not live in these communities.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Ethnicity and class are important variables in service delivery and should not serve as barriers to effective client-worker relationships. This principle of practice is consistent with the thrust of the helping professions over the past two decades toward making clinical services more relevant to the needs of blacks and other ethnic-minority groups. Increased knowledge and sensitivity about the interrelationships between the concepts of race, culture, ethnicity, class, and gender will enhance and broaden educators' and practitioners' frames of reference and help them reformulate their assessment and treatment of the black client. This reformulation should include both the practitioners' willingness to work on their own personal issues related to these concepts, and an ability to differentiate between psychopathological conditions and culture-specific phenomena (see Mayo, 1974).

For example, a black male client from the inner city is referred to the nearest mental health center across town, whose staff is 95 percent white. He sits staring at the floor with a deadpan expression and chooses to "volunteer nothing" because he simply does not see how talking about his problems with a young white female could help. He answers some questions with grunts or monosyllabic colloquial expressions in a distinct regional accent. It is important that a worker in this situation respond by identifying what elements of the client's behavior may be attributed to living in a hostile environment, to a coping style, and what might be characterological. Instead, however, the young female worker in our example summarized the contact with the following impressionistic statement: "This client is hostile, angry, depressed, and possibly in need of hospitalization. His colloquialisms are something with which I am unfamiliar—for example, he uses the expression 'That's cheer,' apparently meaning 'that's good.' His lack of literacy is disturbing." Factors contributing to lack of communication between worker and client in this example are extremely complex. Not only is the worker's lack of knowledge and experience in working with clients who have a different background a factor, but there is also a pervasive attitude about certain groups of clients within this service-delivery system. Generally, staff view those clients as unresponsive to psychotherapeutic interventions, and they are simply written off as nonserviceable. The above example in no way negates the difficulty that a black female worker might also have with this client. In fact, the client may see the black worker as equally ineffective because of gender differences as well as privilege acquired through

her social class status based on her educational and social background. The black worker may also be viewed as young and having lived an existence that is commonly referred to as ahistorical (see Williams et al., 1985) and could find it extremely difficult to establish rapport with this client.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the complexity involved in conceptualizing and understanding the black experience in America, it is imperative that helping professionals increase their knowledge and sensitivity about the various concepts that attempt to describe as well as organize the black experience. In the context of making decisions about family dynamics and treatment strategies, it is important to emphasize that such decisions are based not only upon the practitioner's understanding of the interrelationships between the concepts of race, ethnicity, culture, social class, and gender, but also on the practitioner's frame of reference. Optimal recognition, understanding, and application of the concepts in this chapter will enhance the practitioner's overall effectiveness and provide an arena in which the client would be able to feel understood, thereby connecting to the treatment process in a growth-producing way.

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