

CHANGES IN CULTURAL BENCHMARKS IN THE MULTIETHNIC UNITED STATES

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The United States (U.S.) is a country comprised of numerous ethnic groups. Both between and within these different groups, there is tremendous diversity in terms of timing and reasons for immigration to the U.S., level of acculturation and maintenance of cultural benchmarks (i.e., maintenance of the cultural traditions, values, assumptions, and practices of the particular ethnic group). When describing the U.S. population, the terms "majority" and "minority" groups are often employed.

1. Majority culture versus minority ethnic groups

What is considered the "majority" culture includes individuals of eastern and western European ancestry, who themselves represent a wide variety of countries of origin and religious affiliations. In terms of racial identification, these individuals are considered "non-Hispanic white" or "Caucasian." For example, individuals with English, German, Italian and Polish ancestry are included in this group. In addition to great diversity in terms of country of origin, European Americans also demonstrate diversity in level of acculturation, among other variables. Those considered to be the "majority" culture tend to be those European Americans who have been established in the U.S. for a significant amount of time (e.g., several generations), rather than recent immigrants, and whose traditional worldviews according to their native country have been impacted by the ongoing process of acculturation. The members of the majority culture as a whole are considered to be the "dominant" members of American socio-economic-political society, and to represent "mainstream American culture."

Individuals who are considered to be "minorities" are those who comprise smaller percentages of the U.S. population. As

racial minorities, different ethnic groups are considered subordinate in that members have significantly less control or power over valued resources and over their lives than the members of the dominant or majority group (Schaefer, 1992). In the U.S. the three largest racial minority groups include African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans. Individuals of African descent make up the largest segment of what we term African Americans, but also include individuals from the Caribbean Islands, for example, who are non-Hispanic blacks. The term Asian American encompasses over 30 distinct cultural and linguistic groups (Tanjasiri, Wallace & Shibata, 1995), and refers to people who originated from many geographic regions, such as China, Japan, Korea, and the Phillipines, as well as those who reside in Hawaii and other Pacific Islands. Hispanic American is an umbrella term that is used to include individuals of Hispanic origin (black or white), from Mexico, Puerto Rico (a commonwealth of the U.S.), South and Central America, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, for example.

According to a recent report of the U.S. Bureau of the Census (September, 1998), the total U.S. population currently includes approximately 72.3% European Americans, 12.1% African Americans, 11.3% Hispanic Americans, and 3.6% Asian Americans. Estimates project that within 50 years, half of the U.S. population will be ethnic minorities. Ironically, the ethnic groups considered to be *minorities* will, as a combined group, become the numeric *majority* in the 21st century. Hispanic Americans alone, for example, will surpass African Americans as the country's largest minority group by 2005, and will represent 25% of the total U.S. population by 2050. With increased integration in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods, there will be increased opportunities for social interaction between existing ethnic groups and resulting increases in interethnic relationships and families (Burnette, 1995). The consequence will be increasing overlap among all ethnic groups.

2. Worldviews

Again, individual and subgroup differences exist within each ethnic group regarding national history, cultural heritage, timing of, reasons for and the experience of immigrating to

the U.S., and level of acculturation. Generalizations of worldview and social support therefore cannot be accurate for every member of a specific group. However, as other clinicians and researchers have done (e.g., Ho, 1987), we attempt to describe characteristics that represent *most* individuals within a particular ethnic group in our discussions of worldviews and the use of social resources. We also note that the worldviews of the different ethnic groups within the U.S. tend to change with the process of acculturation, and eventually may become quite distinct from the traditional worldviews of their ancestral homelands. When discussing the worldview of the majority culture in the U.S., what is termed the "Eurocentric worldview" differs greatly from the worldviews of present-day citizens from the specific European countries from which the European Americans may have their origins. In fact, examination of the worldview of mainstream American culture as a whole may bear little resemblance to the traditional European worldviews European Americans may have demonstrated when they or their families first came to the U.S. prior to the processes of acculturation and assimilation to an "American" culture (Rodriguez & Kosloski, 1998; Steinberg, 1989).

Worldviews are defined as the basic set of beliefs and assumptions that reflect the values of a specific culture and influence how one perceives and interacts with the world on a daily basis (Nobles, 1985; Sue & Sue, 1990). Worldviews influence traditional behavioral patterns used by families in interacting with one another and in identifying the acceptable use of social resources. The generalized worldview of European Americans, that is the Eurocentric worldview, differs a great deal from those of the three minority cultures we have identified. According to the Eurocentric worldview, individualism is valued over the collective needs of the larger community. Independence and competitiveness are encouraged and seen as strengths relative to interdependence and cooperative efforts aimed to bring the greatest good for the greatest number. Communication is characterized by assertiveness and direct verbal confrontation, and there is an emphasis on future time orientation (Sue & Sue, 1990). Within the family system, a self-sufficient nuclear family unit is seen as an American ideal. As a function of this worldview, there is growing acceptance for adult individuals to move frequently for educational,

occupational, or self-oriented purposes, to live in locations very distant from their parents and siblings, and to have less contact with extended relatives than during previous generations. These elements of the Eurocentric worldview are in contrast with the Afrocentric worldview and the traditional worldviews of Asian and Hispanic Americans as described below.

Nobles (1986) specified the elements of the Afrocentric worldview which include: attention to interconnectedness, spirituality and religious orientation, emphasis on oral tradition and expressive communication, orientation toward group identity and collective consciousness, and perception of time as fluid. The Afrocentric worldview encourages strong "kinship bonds," which include close relationships with extended family networks and "non-blood relatives" (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Again, although there are differences within this group (particularly in younger generations), African Americans tend to remain in close proximity to their families and as a whole, to not move great distances with high frequency. For those that do move away from their families, ultimately many will return to their home communities.

The traditional Asian worldview emphasizes the group, and especially the family, as a greater priority than the individual (Berg & Jaya, 1993). The honor and reputation of the family are highly valued, so that individual desires and needs may be suppressed for the sake of family loyalty. Other elements of a traditional Asian worldview include structured family roles and relationships, harmony between hierarchical roles, filial piety, respect for older persons and the elderly, humility, obedience, moderation in behavior and limited expressiveness, and nonconfrontation or silence as a virtue (Ho, 1987; Sodowsky et al., 1995). Children are encouraged to remain dependent for as long as possible within the family, but the mother is expected to defer to her oldest son when he reaches adulthood (Kane, 1998). Those Asian Americans who are less acculturated to the mainstream worldview also tend to remain in closer proximity to their families and within communities sharing the same worldview.

Marin & Marin (1991) suggest that for Hispanic Americans, the traditional worldview includes the elements of "familism" (i.e., the family), allocentrism, hierarchical family structure, spirituality, personal space, "simpatia" (i.e., empathy),

“persona de confianza” (i.e., a person that is trustworthy, such as a “comadre,” or godmother), and present time orientation (also see Lopez, 1999). “Familism,” for instance, is a strong attachment and identification with family members that may reflect interdependence, physical affection, male leadership, and extended family networks. The strong attachment is characterized by close interconnectedness, solidarity, and loyalty within the family unit. Similar to the Afrocentric worldview, the traditional Hispanic worldview values an extended family unit that is made up of “non-blood relatives” (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Like the Asian worldview, allocentrism, a form of collectivism that mandates that the needs of the group or family be of primary concern, is an element strongly valued by Hispanic Americans. In the traditional Hispanic worldview, there is an hierarchical family structure that includes such concepts as “machisimo” (male dominance, in control of the family) and “mariansimo” (female submissiveness and lack of power). Once again, although there are differences within the Hispanic American population, these individuals tend to remain in close proximity to their extended families and within Hispanic communities; Although, as those that are more assimilated grow in number, there is greater movement outside of Hispanic communities for reasons similar to those of European Americans (e.g., economic opportunities). We emphasize that the traditional worldviews outlined for Asian and Hispanic Americans are continuously impacted by the dynamic processes of acculturation and assimilation that occur as each group extends itself in the U.S. across generations.

3. Social support distinctions among different ethnic groups

Worldviews are essential for understanding social functioning within particular groups. What is considered an acceptable and adaptive use of social resources, or social support, differs according to ethnic group identification. Social support is conceptualized in a variety of ways in the literature, but in general can involve formal networks, such as schools, social agencies and institutions, or informal networks of relatives and friends. Cobb (1982) indicates that the most essential type of support involves emotional or esteem-building interaction, which also serves to set the foundation for

receiving support in the form of tangible goods, services, social interaction, and information or guidance. For each ethnic group, the family unit is an important structure for providing social support when undergoing stressful life events, but each group generally demonstrates different patterns in terms of the source of support that is accessed as well as how directly it is accessed (Kane, 1998). When examining use of social support in the face of stressful circumstances, we see European Americans generally depending on support within the immediate family, but also directly reaching out for ancillary support from a wide variety of sources, including informal sources such as friends, extended family, as well as formal sources, sometimes of a professional nature. Therefore, there is a vast array of individuals and systems from which European Americans glean supportive social resources.

African Americans seek social support predominately from family members that include kinship bonds and non-blood relatives. The strong kinship bonds can be seen in this group's ability to verbally request support from family members and to maintain long-term extended family ties. Among African Americans, religious institutions are extremely important sources of support and the networks of African Americans often include individuals affiliated with their churches. Compared to members of other ethnic groups, elderly African Americans tend to have larger and better connected support networks that are longer lasting and that provide a variety of resources. African American women in particular tend to seek support from other women as opposed to support from the males in their networks. The informal supports within the African American community are resilient, flexible and resourceful. They are an adaptive response to difficult and stressful circumstances and have evolved into a crucial element of the African American support system (Boyd-Franklin 1989).

Asian Americans tend toward a more subtle and indirect approach and demonstrate self-control and restraint as opposed to direct expressions of individual opinion or need (Kane, 1998). With strong family bonds and expectations of loyalty, a family is expected to provide social support to all of its members. Problem-solving around issues is done through negotiation and mediation as there is no word for privacy in many Asian languages including Chinese, Japanese or

Korean (Berg & Jaya, 1993). Asian Americans that are less acculturated are less inclined to seek support in an active fashion—especially from individuals or systems outside of the family system, and particularly those outside of Asian American society.

The importance of “familism” is characteristic of the Hispanic American families when social support is needed. With their strong family ties, feelings of loyalty, and more defined social roles and duties, support among family members is highly dependable and reciprocal. Hispanic Americans utilize family supports informally by turning to family members first, including intergenerational family members and non-blood relationships (e.g., “compadres” (godfathers), “comadres” (godmothers), or “personas de confianza” (literally, persons of confidence)), rather than seeking support outside of the family unit (Lopez, 1999). From the myriad of family relations, social support is expected to be available and to be given freely, without directly asking for the assistance. To some extent, this may explain why traditional Hispanic Americans are less likely to seek support outside of the family system. When outside support is sought, it is usually from religious or spiritual institutions, or from grassroot social organizations (e.g., “La Yaucano”).

4. Acculturation and Maintenance of Cultural Benchmarks

Despite the idea of the “melting pot” theory, which predicted that individuals from all nations would melt into a new race with a common language and set of customs upon residing in the U.S. (Steinberg, 1989), the unique aspects of different ethnic groups did not diffuse or disappear. The melting pot concept turned out to be more of a theoretical ideal that never materialized (Glazer & Moynihan, 1964). If this concept had been accurate, we would have seen the development of a singular, generic “American” cultural identity with little residue of distinct cultural benchmarks from many societies. In reality, even though there has been acculturation (and assimilation) to the majority culture, many individuals from varying ethnic backgrounds maintained key elements of their country of origin, including language, worldview, and/or customs. Additionally, although individuals originating from many European nations form the base of what is mainstream American, or majority culture, many of

these individuals maintained key elements of their ethnic background (e.g., Jewish Americans who continue to practice their faith and family customs according to ancient tradition)--although for some groups, the maintained benchmark may involve modified characteristics (e.g., Jewish Americans practicing according to the "Reformed" movement). However, for *all* ethnic groups, there is a greater tendency for subsequent generations to acculturate and assimilate as new generations are born in the U.S.

So, second, third and later generations are more likely to acculturate than adult immigrants and first generation offspring. In order to be motivated to acculturate, if there is such a choice, individuals must perceive more positive benefits to such change than to interacting solely within their own ethnic communities. Individual level factors that may influence the volition to acculturate include sense of self, or self-esteem, and tolerance for the unknown, for example. Individuals who have a strong sense of self, who can tolerate any potential, initial fear, and who find challenge in new experiences and do not view interaction as dilution of their culture, may seek to acculturate more readily. Environmental variables that may have an influence include the opportunity for exposure to the dominant culture as well exposure to positive models in the larger society with whom individuals may seek to interact or emulate. In some cases, there may be "forced emersion" where an individual or family has no choice but to interact predominantly with members of the majority culture (e.g., a family that is brought to the U.S. and hosted by individuals who reside within the dominant culture ; an immigrant child who attends a U.S. public school without appropriate cultural accommodations).

Independent of the cause, the pattern with the majority culture, as well as with other groups within the U.S., has been towards greater acculturation and assimilation with subsequent generations. We note that many European Americans who have not maintained specific cultural benchmarks across generations within the U.S. currently seek to revive their unique traditions and customs that may have been lost during the process of acculturation (some of this search to renew cultural roots may function to strengthen self-identity as respect for cultural distinction within the U.S. grows).

The paragraphs that follow suggest possibilities as to why there has been a maintenance of cultural benchmarks for ethnic minorities in the U.S. It should be highlighted that many of these same possibilities can be used to discuss reasons for maintenance of benchmarks for specific cultural groups within the *majority* culture when they first arrived in the U.S. (e.g., Irish immigrants in the 18th century).

The motivation for ethnic minorities to maintain benchmarks of cultural distinction has been varied, and in some cases, may have been fueled by intolerance for diversity in the U.S.. In some situations, where immigrants came to the U.S. to provide a better life for themselves and their families for example, individuals attempted to acculturate in order to achieve the "American dream" (Steinberg, 1989). In the hopes of becoming more "Americanized," and in some cases due to ill feelings toward their countries of origin (for political, economic, or other reasons), some minority individuals eagerly relinquished their language, customs and traditions. However, sometimes the simple fact that they "looked different" (e.g., had different skin color and hair texture) than the majority culture was a barrier for them to achieve the full benefits of the American dream, and be fully accepted at every level and in all regions of the U.S.. In addition, some immigrants with languages and lifestyles that stood in stark contrast to those of the U.S. were initially fearful to interact with the larger U.S. society, and/or had limited desire or opportunity for exposure. Therefore, some individuals did not strive to acculturate and find comfort and acceptance through maintaining benchmarks relevant to their ethnic identity, although they may continue to interact with the dominant society to access economic resources. For these individuals, their methods of accessing social support are likely to be consistent with the traditional worldviews of their ethnic background and are adaptive and functional given their status in U.S. society.

Although the trend for many ethnic groups has been towards acculturation, others reject the concept. In some cases, various groups migrated to the U.S. and created smaller versions of their country of origin, such as New York City's Chinatown and Spanish Harlem, with limited acculturation to the majority culture. These communities provide a safe haven for individuals to express themselves in their native language, and feel a sense of camaraderie, ethnic identity,

and a sense of oneness with others who are like themselves. Again, for individuals living in these settings, the traditional worldview of their particular ethnic background dictates the use of social support and is adaptive for their lifestyles. The maintenance and further growth of these ethnic cultural communities reinforces the continuance of traditional worldviews and social interaction among its members, and are themselves reinforced by fears related to interacting with those different from themselves, experiences of isolation and fear of potential discrimination when interacting with the dominant culture, and intra- and inter-group rejection.

Many ethnic minorities have also turned to lives of "marginality," or the status of living between two cultures, or two worlds, without truly belonging to either (Hurh, 1989). In some cases, this can lead to a sense of alienation and isolation as such individuals can perceive rejection not only from the majority culture, but also from within their ethnic group. For example, an Hispanic American may be chastised by other Hispanic Americans for "trying to be white" when not displaying interest in Hispanic culture, such as speaking the Spanish language, and for seeking what might be considered mainstream American goals, such as a large house in an affluent European American suburb. Such individuals may not be able to access social support from sources where it would be most adaptive because their worldview may be in conflict with the potential support provider. Conflict can arise between family members and across generations when some members maintain predominant lifestyles of acculturation while others maintain the more traditional ethnic lifestyle. In these situations, family members can view those that acculturate as "selling out" and rejecting the traditional worldview of their ethnic origin (Hurh, 1989). When Puerto Rican Americans forgo traditional "familism" for other positive aspects of American society, Rodriguez and Kosloski (1998) call this the "double jeopardy of acculturation." As the U.S. transitions to a more pluralistic society, such tensions within and between groups may ease as there becomes greater acceptance for diversity.

5. Pluralistic Society

As opposed to the ideals of the melting pot perspective with the goal of a homogenized culture with the values of the

dominant culture at the core (Newman, 1973), the U.S. now embraces “pluralism” as the ideal. Pluralism is a term that has been used to refer to the genuine acceptance of ethnic diversity, as opposed to mere *tolerance* for differences within a society (Steinberg, 1989). Pluralism supports the respect and maintenance of diverse ethnic identities within the dominant culture. This perspective implies mutual respect between the various groups in the society, a respect that allows individuals from minority groups to express and display those benchmarks of their specific ethnic background without suffering prejudice or hostility. Individuals may integrate into the dominant culture by learning and speaking the English language and participating in customs of the dominant society, while simultaneously engaging in their own ethnic group customs as well as those different from their own. In other words, the U.S. is increasingly becoming a multicultural society that no longer demands that individuals assimilate in order to be accepted (Kotcher, 1995).

With growing acceptance and respect for diversity, there has been a resurgence of interest in ethnic identity, combined with respect of diverse languages, worldviews and customs. Both ethnic minorities and individuals comprising the dominant culture have rekindled interest in their ethnic heritage, including some forgotten languages, customs, festivals and traditions (Kotcher, 1995). Educators, community leaders and politicians have spoken out against the destruction of cultural benchmarks in the name of conformity. Whether the motivation for increased acceptance stems from economics (e.g., the growing interdependence among nations which has contributed to the growth of international trade and created the “global village;” marketing specifically tailored to the growing ethnic minority groups in the U.S. (Kotcher, 1995)); educational mandates (e.g., federally required diversity training for students, faculty, and employees); or the acknowledgment of a dynamic picture of competition in which what serves the purposes of humans most effectively survives while what does not tends to decline, there is recognition that changes are necessary as the minority groups in U.S. society become the numeric majority.

As these changes occur, there also are potential consequences of a pluralistic society that ultimately may result in altered worldviews and changes in benchmarks

including behaviors surrounding social support. Although there remains evidence of racism and tension within and between ethnic groups, there is increasing diversity and integration in settings such as schools, workplaces and neighborhoods, and in all areas of life. According to Cleveland (1995), "cultures keep redefining themselves by mixing with other cultures, getting to know people who look, act and behave differently. In today's more open electronic world, cultures also expose themselves to new faiths and fashions, new life-styles, workways, technologies, clothing and cuisines." As different ethnic groups feel secure that they have an established and encouraged right to demonstrate their unique distinction, and begin to be treated individually as equals in U.S. society, formerly inclusive societies may begin to integrate with other groups (Cleveland, 1995). Consequentially, as the U.S. population continues to diversify in the next century, and as the goals of pluralism develop, the U.S. may see increasing overlap among all ethnic groups, with the potential for an amalgamated society. With full acceptance of social integration, there would be greater openness to share one's own background, greater motivation to understand the backgrounds of others, and the opportunity to share common aspects of the group as a whole. Such a society would allow for an American culture that respects and celebrates its full foundation of diverse cultural benchmarks.

6. Bibliography

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