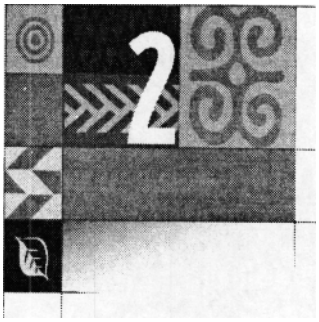

Sociocultural Perspectives on the Lives of Women and Men

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This *chapter explains the basic ingredients in a sociocultural analysis of gender. A major goal of this perspective is to identify ways in which specific features of a culture influence specific aspects of the lives of women and men. Key elements of culture are described and illustrated. These include norms, roles, social status, stereotypes, ideology, and values. We also discuss the experiences of American ethnic groups; three important components of ethnicity are culture, identity, and social status. A central message is that the meaning of being a woman (or a man) depends on the person's sociocultural context.*

The lives of women and men are shaped in crucial ways by the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. Consider the behavior of women in two very different environments in Los Angeles.

At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), women constitute about half the student body. UCLA students come from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds, but they share a belief in the value of education and a commitment to academic achievement. Although UCLA women may argue a point vigorously in class or yell angrily at a friend, physical fights between women on campus are rare.

Just a few miles from UCLA in an economically depressed section of the city, other young women live in a very different social world. In the culture of urban gangs, "gang girls" must be tough, fearless, and willing to fight (Sikes, 1997). According to research by Mary Harris (1994), gang girls often come from troubled families, drop out of school, and turn to gang membership for a sense of identity and belonging. Violence is a way of life. Gang girls get into fights and use weapons to hurt or even kill their enemies. As one gang girl, Maryann, explained, "It's not that you like to fight. You have to fight. But I like fighting" (p. 296). Girls living in dangerous neighborhoods gain a sense of support, knowing that other gang members will "back you

up" in case of trouble. According to another gang member, Cindy, "We had to hurt others to take care of ourselves. Mostly I carried a switchblade in my sock" (p. 297). Being "bad," "crazy," or "wild" enhances a gang girl's status. The fiercest fighter is usually the leader of the girls' group. It is estimated that there are more than 7,000 female gang members in Los Angeles (Sikes, 1997).

Are women aggressive? Women on college campuses seldom use physical violence, but in urban ghettos, gang girls are prepared to fight for their lives. As this example indicates, there is no generic or typical woman whose life reflects the essential experiences of all women. Spelman (1988) correctly observed that "all women are women, but there is no being who is only a woman" (p. 102). All people are simultaneously affected by their gender and their sociocultural context.

The Spanish language conveys the inseparability of gender and culture more clearly than English: a *Chicana* is simultaneously a female and a person of Mexican American heritage; a *Chicano* is a Mexican American male. What it means to be a woman (or a man) depends on the person's *sociocultural context,* which includes the person's cultural, ethnic, and social class experiences and environment. In this reading we identify key elements in a sociocultural analysis of gender.

Toward a More Inclusive Understanding of Women and Men

In the past decade, social scientists and feminist scholars have grown increasingly aware of the importance of expanding their analyses of gender to incorporate culture, ethnicity, and social class. One reason is the increasing diversity of the American population. As shown in Table 1, White Americans of European heritage currently constitute 73% of the population, but the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2050, European Americans will be barely half the population. To date, however, progress toward integrating the study of gender and culture has been slow.

American researchers continue to focus largely on the experiences of White, middle-class individuals, often college students. In a review of research in social psychology, David Sears (1986) showed that nearly 75% of published articles were based on college students, and 78% of studies were conducted in laboratories rather than in naturalistic settings. Sears argued persuasively that this heavy reliance on a very

Table 1 • Background Characteristics of the United States Population*

	1997	**2050** ***(estimate)***
White/European	73%	53%
African/Caribbean	12	14
Hispanic/Latino	11	25
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	8
Native American	1	1

* Numbers are percentages of the total population. 8/10
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1997).

narrow database can distort the view of human nature that emerges from psycho--logical research. In an article titled "Most of the subjects were white and middle class," Sandra Graham (1992) reviewed articles published in six leading psychology journals during the 1970s and 1980s. The percentage of articles that included African Americans was low and actually declined over time. Although African Americans constitute 12% of the American population, they were included in only 3.6% of published studies in major journals. Also absent from mainstream psychology is cross-cultural research about the experiences of women and men from non-Western cultures (Lonner & Malpass, 1993).

Gender researchers have not avoided these problems. Feminist psychologists have repeatedly lamented that the existing "psychology of women" is, in reality, a psychology of White-middle-class American women (e.g., Espin, 1997, p. 35; Hyde, 1996, p. 212). In a review of psychological studies published between 1987 and 1994, Reid and Kelly (1994) demonstrated that empirical research continues to neglect women of color. For example, they found more than 1,600 journal articles on the topic of women and work, but only 4% considered African American women and less than 1% included Hispanic women. Ethnic minority women were similarly underrepresented in articles on women and therapy (1.2% African American, 0.2% Hispanic), rape (2.5% African American, 1.8% Hispanic), and body image (3.2% African American, 0.8% Hispanic).

Feminist publications may do a somewhat better job of including women of color than mainstream publications. Reid and Kelly (1994) found that about 15% of the empirical papers published in the journals *Psychology of Women Quarterly* and Sex Roles analyzed the impact of race or ethnicity. Nonetheless, Reid and Kelly concluded that research purportedly studying the "universal woman" usually focuses on White, middle-class populations.

Finally, it is also important to note that the growing research literature on race and ethnicity typically ignores gender. This trend is vividly illustrated in a publication of the American Psychological Association: Psychological *Perspectives on Human Diversity in America* (Goodchilds, 1991). This volume includes two comprehensive reviews, one about race and a second about ethnicity and culture. Neither mentions gender. Also included is a chapter on gender that does not address ethnicity or culture. As these chapters by leading scholars demonstrate, research on gender and research on ethnicity/race have developed largely in isolation from each other. Reid and Comas-Diaz (1990, p. 400) warn that "As in gender studies which ignore race, ethnic studies which overlook gender present us with an incomplete and, possibly, distorted view of the behaviors we attempt to investigate."

Many factors contribute to the neglect of culture and ethnicity in research on gender (cf. Albert, 1988; Graham, 1992). Researchers tend to study topics that are relevant to their personal experiences or concerns. The dramatic increase in research on women and gender in the past three decades has resulted in part from the influx of women into professional disciplines such as psychology and sociology, and the creation of women's studies as an academic field of inquiry. Most researchers, however, remain White and middle class, and lack familiarity with people from other cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Most researchers would feel more at home studying college students than gang members.

Another reason for the lack of research incorporating culture and ethnicity is that researchers often try to simplify the phenomena they study, to reduce the great complexity of human life to more manageable proportions. Focusing on a single familiar ethnic or cultural group makes the researcher's work easier. Third, few researchers have received training about ethnic or cultural issues and may lack the expertise to study unfamiliar populations. Fourth, some researchers may find it difficult to recruit ethnically diverse samples of participants. Fifth, researchers may be wary of conducting research with socially sensitive populations or studying controversial topics. Investigators may worry that reporting ethnic differences will contribute to stereotypes about ethnic minority groups or be used to justify discrimination against group members. Together these explanations suggest that many researchers may lack the motivation, training, or resources to conduct research that simultaneously addresses both gender and culture/ethnicity.

Equally important, researchers often lack an analytic framework for conceptualizing cultural variation. As Hope Landrine (1995, p. 2) noted, "reporting ethnic differences without theoretical explanation belittles culture." Consider these recent findings from social science research:

- Virtually all Korean American men (93%) marry Korean American women. In contrast, less than half of Korean American women (49%) marry Korean Ameri can men (Hwang, Saenz, & Aguirre, 1997, p. 766).
- According to U.S. census data, the gender gap in wages for full-time workers varies by ethnicity. Among Whites, women earn about 70% of what men earn; among Blacks, women earn about 89% of what men earn (Spain & Bianchi, 1996, p. 132).
- There are ethnic differences in the age when girls begin to menstruate, with pu berty typically beginning earlier for African American girls, later for White girls, and later still for Asian American girls (Matlin, 1996, p. 132).

Without explanation, these findings are bits of cultural trivia that tell us little about the ways in which culture and gender are intertwined. To make sense of findings such as these, we need an understanding of the sociocultural context—an account that helps us to interpret the patterns observed. We agree with Landrine (1995) that

> the challenge for psychology . . . is to develop an explicit, theoretical framework through which sociocultural variables and differences will be rendered coherent.. . . Psychology as a whole and feminist psychology in particular need a model for understanding cultural variables, a theory of the relationship between culture and behavior that neither romanticizes cultures nor renders difference deviance (p. 2).

Sociocultural Analyses of Gender

The goal of a sociocultural analysis of gender is to identify ways in which specific features of a cultural context influence specific aspects of the lives of women and men. Consider the case of "man the hunter." In most hunting-and-gathering cultures,

men hunt game animals, and women gather edible plants. This common sex difference has led some observers to suggest that men are natural-born hunters and that pregnancy and child care make women incapable of hunting. This view that "biology is destiny" was seriously challenged by a three-year study of the Agta hunter-gatherers of the Philippines (Goodman, Griffin, Estioko-Griffin &r Grove, 1985). In Agta culture, women participate actively in hunting, providing almost half of the game animals killed. Hunting activities do not impair women's fertility or interfere with their maternal responsibilities. What factors enable these women to hunt successfully? The rich natural environment of the Agta permits hunting relatively close to living areas, which makes it easier for women to hunt. Women take nursing infants with them on the hunt, but are able to leave older children at home with relatives, who engage in cooperative child care. Further, although men often prefer to hunt alone, women tend to hunt in all-women or mixed-sex groups, which increases their efficiency. Together, the physical environment and the social customs of the Agta enable women to become highly effective hunters, even during their peak reproductive years. This research is informative because it provides a detailed analysis of cultural factors that make it possible for women to succeed at a task typically considered to be for men only.

Key Elements of Culture

In general terms, *culture* refers to the shared beliefs, values, traditions, and behavior patterns of a particular group. Material culture consists of those aspects of the environment made by people, everything from ceramic pots and woven baskets to flush toilets and personal computers. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next by parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other respected members of the culture. In technological societies the mass media also convey cultural messages. This process of transmitting culture across generations is known as *socialization.* Because cultural beliefs are widely shared and can be taken for granted, they are seldom discussed by adults (Brislin, 1993). We may become most aware of our own culture when we interact with people from a different culture. Both the joys and frustrations of travel to other parts of the world are provided by exposure to new ways of life.

Because the goal of a sociocultural analysis of gender is to understand how specific features of a culture affect the lives of women and men, it is important to identify key elements of culture. In the following sections, we consider social norms, social roles, social status, ideology, stereotypes, and values.

Social Norms Rules and expectations about how group members should behave are known technically as *social norms.* Americans tend to consider a friend late for a lunch meeting after 19 minutes; Brazilians give a friend nearly twice as long, not considering the friend late until 34 minutes after the arranged time (Levine, 1988). Americans talking to a stranger prefer to sit about 35 inches apart. In Venezuela the preferred distance is 32 inches, and in Japan it is 40 inches (Sussman & Rosenfeld, 1982). As these examples suggest, cultures develop norms about virtually all aspects of life. Gender norms define such things as the names considered appropriate for male versus female babies and the ways men and women dress or wear their hair.

Social Roles This term refers to the set of social norms about how a person in a particular social position such as a mother or warrior is expected to act. *Social roles* define the rights and responsibilities of group members and prescribe which qualities and behaviors are appropriate or ideal and which are unacceptable. Cultures typically define distinctive roles for males and females. Traditionally, it has been assumed that women and men should perform different activities and possess different personality traits.

Consider an American example. When researchers asked mid western college students about a typical first date, they found general agreement about what the man and woman are expected to do (Rose & Frieze, 1989). The man typically takes a leadership role on a first date. He initiates the date by asking the woman out and deciding what to do together. He meets his date at her home or dorm and chats briefly with parents or roommates. If going somewhere by car, the man opens the car door for the woman and drives. A first date might entail going to a movie or party and having something to eat. The man is expected to pay the couple's expenses. He is also the one to initiate physical contact—holding hands or kissing good-night. It is up to the man to ask for another date. The woman has a more responsive role on a first date, waiting for the man to pick her up, participating in the activities he proposes, allowing him to pay expenses, and accepting or rejecting his attempts at physical contact. These rules for a first date cast men and women in distinctive and complementary social roles based on their gender.

Status *and Power* Cultures also define the social status of group members. *Social status* refers to a person's rank, privileges, or power in a group. Traditionally, age and gender have been important determinants of status, with greater power being accorded to elders and to men. In a system of patriarchy, the father or senior male is the acknowledged decision maker for the family. In some cultures male dominance is an accepted way of life. In the United States today, the balance of power between the sexes is harder to ascertain. In public life, laws denying women the vote and forbidding women to own property are a thing of the past. Women are increasingly visible in professional careers and government service. Nonetheless, the percentage of American women in positions of power as heads of government, CEOs of major corporations, and university presidents continues to be relatively small. In their personal lives, many heterosexual Americans describe their dating relationships and marriages as relatively egalitarian or equal in power (Peplau & Campbell, 1989). When relationships are perceived as unequal, male dominance is the most common pattern.

Ideology Individuals' beliefs about proper or appropriate roles for women and men constitute their gender-role ideology. Traditionalists endorse a division of labor by gender and a pattern of male dominance. Egalitarians reject these beliefs, preferring to base social roles and power relations on factors other than gender. Gender-role ideology can be thought of as a continuum, ranging from traditional to egalitarian attitudes. In American society beliefs about women's and men's roles have changed considerably during this century. In 1936 only 18% of the American public approved of a married woman working for pay if her husband could support her. By

1976, 65% of men and 70% of women approved of wives working outside the home (Boer, 1977).

Cross-cultural research shows considerable variation in gender-role beliefs. Williams and Best (1990a) asked people in 14 countries to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with such statements as: "The husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in matters of law" and "A woman should have exactly the same freedom of action as a man." Around the world, women tend to have less traditional attitudes about gender than men; these differences are fairly small, however, and pale in comparison to the larger differences found between cultures. In general, traditional attitudes are strongest in rural areas, in nonindustrialized societies, and in Muslim countries. Modern economic development, advances in women's education, and increases in the percentage of women working outside the home all tend to promote more egalitarian attitudes.

Stereotypes Beliefs about the typical attributes of women and men are known as *gender stereotypes.* Researchers Williams and Best (1990b) described two imaginary people:

> One is said to be adventurous, autocratic, coarse, dominant, forceful, independent and strong. [The] other is described as affectionate, dependent, dreamy, emotional, sentimental, submissive, and weak... . Would it be easier to picture one of them as a male and one as a female? . .. Does it matter what nationality you are? (p. 15)

To answer these questions, Williams and Best (1990b) asked college students from 25 nations to indicate which of a long list of adjectives were more frequently associated with men or with women in their own culture.

The researchers found that core elements of gender stereotypes were quite similar among students from such diverse countries as Brazil, Canada, India, Japan, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Spain. In general, men were seen as stronger and more active than women. In all countries respondents identified being adventurous, aggressive, independent, capable, dominant, and strong as masculine qualities. They viewed being emotional, dependent, submissive, shy, and superstitious as female qualities. The researchers emphasized the cross-cultural consistency of their findings, but also noted some cross-cultural differences. For instance, in America men are seen as boastful, disorderly, and obnoxious; in Japan, these traits are linked to women (Williams & Best, 1990b).

The stereotype research we have discussed has explicitly focused on gender. A separate line of research has studied stereotypes about nationalities, assessing, for instance, beliefs about the typical attributes of Germans, Iranians, or Koreans. Research on national stereotypes asks about a group, such as "Italians," and does not specify the gender of the people in question. Eagly and Kite (1987) investigated whether stereotypes of nations reflect stereotypes of both women and men or, instead, are based largely on stereotypes of men. Their research demonstrated that stereotypes of nations are more similar to stereotypes of the men from these countries than of the women. Eagly and Kite suggested that this tendency to equate men and

nationalities stems from men's higher status and greater participation in the political and social activities that shape public perceptions of nations.

Values Beliefs about which behaviors and personal qualities are important and which are inconsequential—*values*—are another important component of culture. Consider the question of what people value in a marriage partner. David Buss and his collaborators (1990) asked more than 9,000 adults from 37 countries to evaluate the importance of 31 characteristics in choosing a mate. Universally, both men and women wanted a mate who was kind, understanding, intelligent, emotionally stable, dependable, and healthy. A few consistent sex differences also emerged:

> In all known cultures worldwide from the ... tribal societies of. . . South America to the big cities of Madrid, London, and Paris, men place a premium on the physical appearance of a potential mate . . . [and] women place a premium on good earning capacity, financial prospects, ambition, industrious-ness, and social status (Buss, 1993, pp. 199-200).

Buss interpreted these sex differences in terms of evolutionary theory, proposing that men value attributes that signal a woman's reproductive capacity and women value attributes that signal a man's ability to provide resources for his mate and offspring. Other researchers interpret the same findings as reflecting differences in men's and women's traditional social roles (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1995). That is, as a result of socialization, people learn to value traits considered typical for each sex.

Buss also found important cross-cultural differences in mate preferences, most notably for such traditional values as premarital chastity, being a good cook and housekeeper, the desire for home and children, and being religious. For example, people from China, India, and Iran highly prize virginity prior to marriage, but people from Scandinavia and the Netherlands do not.

In sum, Buss and his colleagues found that both gender and culture affected people's values. Across the 31 mate characteristics that Buss et al. (1990) studied, the effects of gender were much smaller than those of culture. In technical terms, gender accounted for an average of only 2.4% of the variance in mate preferences, but culture accounted for 14% of the variance.

The Meaning of Behavior: Cultural Universal and Cultural Specifics

A particularly important aspect of culture concerns the *meaning* of behavior (Smith & Bond, 1993).

> Cultural differences are not primarily differences in behavior but differences in the meanings . . . attributed and attached to the "same" behavior. Culture can be regarded as the unwritten social and psychological dictionary that each person has memorized . . . and through which each person unwittingly interprets themselves and others (Landrine, Klonoff & Brown-Collins, 1992, p. 59).

Consider the sleeping arrangements that parents provide for babies (Morelli, Rogoff, Oppenheim & Goldsmith, 1992). In the United States, infants sleep alone

in a crib, preferably in their own bedroom. Americans emphasize the importance of training babies to be self-reliant and independent. One mother commented about moving her infant son to his own bedroom: "It was time to give him his own room . . . his own territory. That's the American way" (Morelli et al., 1992, p. 604). In a world perspective, however, American sleeping patterns are atypical. In most cultures infants and young children sleep with other family members, often the mother or older siblings. For Mayan children and adults, sleeping alone is considered a hardship. Mayan mothers were shocked to learn from a researcher that American infants and toddlers sleep by themselves, and clearly disapproved of what they considered a heartless practice (Morelli et al., 1992). The point is that most behaviors are open to widely different interpretations, depending on one's cultural perspective.

A study by Landrine, Klonoff, and Brown-Collins (1992) illustrates the importance of meaning in understanding gender patterns. These researchers asked White, African American, Asian American, and Latina college women to use a seven-point scale to rate themselves on several gender-stereotypic phrases, including "I am assertive," "I am sensitive to the needs of others," and "I am feminine." The mean scores of the White women and the women of color were identical, suggesting that both groups of women viewed themselves similarly. In a second part of the study, however, the researchers demonstrated that these similarities in numerical ratings concealed differences in interpretation. Participants were given several definitions for each phrase and asked to circle the definition that best matched what she had in mind in making her numerical self-rating. An analysis of these interpretations identified several significant differences between White women and women of color. For instance, White women tended to define *passive* as "laid-back/easy-going"; women of color were more likely to define *passive* as "not saying what one really thinks." Although White women and women of color rated themselves similarly, they attributed different meanings to these ratings. The authors warn that social scientists cannot assume that their "standard" questions or experimental procedures (typically developed by middle-class White researchers) will be interpreted similarly by people from different cultural backgrounds. Recently, Landrine (1995) has advocated that researchers interested in gender and culture adopt an approach she calls *contextualism.* A contextualistic analysis requires that researchers determine the meaning of specific behaviors by analyzing the sociocultural context in which they occur.

As we have seen, the study of culture sometimes uncovers universals that appear to transcend national and ethnic boundaries and sometimes finds important differences among cultural groups. The effort to find cultural universals has been called *etic* analysis (Berry, 1989). In contrast, an *emic* analysis focuses on culture-specific features that differ among cultural groups. These terms are borrowed from a linguistic distinction between phonetics (universal features of spoken sound) and phonemics (sounds unique to a specific language).

Descriptions of cultural universals are invariably abstract. For instance, all cultures create a division of labor based on gender, but the specific tasks assigned to each sex are variable. Research on mate selection suggests that most people desire a dependable partner, but the meaning of dependability probably varies widely. In some cultures sexual fidelity is viewed as essential to dependability, whereas in other cultures it is not (Smith & Bond, 1993).

Finally, it is worth noting that cultural analysis can be applied to groups of varying sizes. In addition to analyses of nations and large cultural groups, we can also consider cultural differences among geographic regions. Richard Nisbett (1993) has argued that a "culture of honor" characterizes the southern United States and encourages White southern men to use violence to protect their homes and defend their honor. Culture can also be studied among relatively small groups, such as the girl gangs discussed earlier. Research into the social norms and customs of college fraternities provides another example. In a recent study, Boswell and Spade (1996) used the concept of "rape culture" to understand why some college fraternities are relatively dangerous places for women, with frequent incidents of rape, and other fraternities are safer environments. In the next section, we consider the application of a cultural analysis to ethnic groups within the United States.

American Ethnic Groups

The term *ethnicity* can refer to groupings of people based on their culture of origin (e.g., Korean Americans), religion (e.g., Jews), or language (e.g., French Canadians). The term *ethnicity* is also increasingly used to encompass race (Phinney, 1996). The concept of genetically determined and distinctive races has little scientific validity (e.g., Jones, 1997; Zuckerman, 1990). Rather, races are social categories determined by features such as skin color and facial characteristics. The United States Bureau of the Census currently uses five basic ethnic categories: Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, Black, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander.

Phinney (1996, p. 918) has argued persuasively that ethnicity is a multidimensional construct that, by itself, explains little. She urges researchers to "unpack the packaged variable of ethnicity . . . [to] identify and assess the variables associated with ethnicity that may explain its influence." Phinney identified three distinct components of ethnicity: culture, identity, and status.

The Cultural Component of Ethnicity

It is useful to analyze ethnic groups in terms of their distinctive cultural norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors. Some researchers have attempted to identify core characteristics of major American ethnic groups. Hispanic Americans, for example, have been characterized as a collectivistic culture that emphasizes the importance of the family, group loyalty, cooperation, and the avoidance of interpersonal conflict (e.g., Gaines, 1997; Marin & Marin, 1991). Broad cultural themes describing an entire ethnic group can be helpful, but they are not without problems. For instance, specific individuals may not possess the characteristics attributed to their ethnic group. A demonstration of this is provided in research about Chinese immigrant teenagers (Feldman, Mont-Reynaud & Rosenthal, 1992). In this study some American-born children of Chinese immigrants held values associated with Chinese culture, but others espoused values indistinguishable from European Americans.

Many Americans live in at least two social worlds—their own ethnic culture and mainstream American culture (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993). For ex-

ample, African Americans are influenced both by their unique cultural heritage as African Americans and by their exposure to mainstream American culture (e.g., Jones, 1997). Recent immigrants to the United States face the challenge of adjusting to life in a new culture. In addition, the increase in interethnic marriages means that more children are of mixed cultural heritage. As a result, there is often much diversity within any particular ethnic group. Consequently, research about American ethnic groups should directly assess the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of research participants, rather than assuming that all members of a given group will necessarily be identical.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that all Americans have an ethnic heritage, including Whites. Cross-cultural researchers have described mainstream Euro-American culture as highly individualistic (e.g., Triandis, 1995). In an individualistic culture, a person's behavior is guided largely by personal goals, rather than the goals of collectives such as the family or workgroup. If a conflict arises between an individual's personal goals and the goals of the group, it is acceptable to put self-interest first. Feminist scholars have also begun to analyze the nature of "whiteness" (e.g., Hurtado & Stewart, 1997) and to raise concerns about the extent to which feminist scholarship is biased toward European American culture (Landrine, 1995).

The Identity Component of Ethnicity

Individuals vary in the strength and salience of their identification with their ethnic group, referred to as *ethnic identity* (Phinney, 1996). Teenagers from African American, Asian American, Native American, or Latino backgrounds sometimes struggle with the challenge of creating a personal identity that reconciles their ethnic heritage and their participation in mainstream American society. A Chinese girl who moved to the United States at age 12 described her feelings:

> I don't know who I am. Am I the good Chinese daughter? Am I an American teenager? I always feel I am letting my parents down when I am with my friends because I act so American, but I also feel that I will never really be an American (quoted in Olsen, 1988, p. 30).

Phinney (1990) suggests that there are four main ways in which this young woman might resolve the dilemma of identifying with Chinese and American cultures. She might largely give up her ethnic heritage, assimilate the culture of the dominant society, and develop a *mainstream identity* as an American. This is the traditional "melting pot" perspective on how new immigrants can best adjust to living in the United States. In contrast, the Chinese American teen might identify strongly with both cultures, forging a *bicultural identity.* Some researchers have suggested that the development of bicultural competence, the ability to navigate successfully in two cultural communities, may have important psychological benefits (LaFromboise et al, 1993). Third, the Chinese American girl might develop few ties to the majority culture and maintain a strong *ethnic identity* as Chinese. Finally, she might have weak ties to both groups and remain a socially marginal outsider.

Whereas ethnic identity is usually salient for members of cultural minority groups, it is not necessarily salient for the White majority. According to Hurtado and

Stewart (1997, p. 299), "a recurrent finding in the study of whiteness is the fact that white respondents do not consider their 'whiteness' as an identity or a marker of group membership." Some Whites identify with a particular heritage, such as being Amish or Irish American, but whiteness per se is not necessarily a relevant category.

The Status Component of Ethnicity

In American culture, ethnicity is often linked to social status. On average, White Americans tend to have higher status and power in the society and tend to be more affluent and better educated than ethnic minorities. There are, of course, exceptions—poor Whites and wealthy minorities, for example. Nonetheless, efforts to understand the life experiences of ethnic minority women and men must go beyond culture and identity to investigate issues of status, power, social class, and the related problems of prejudice and discrimination (Collins, 1997).

The association of ethnicity and status has important implications for sociocultural analyses of gender. Patterns observed among members of an ethnic group may reflect cultural factors, but may also reflect the group's economic, social, and political status in society. Brislin (1993) notes that Americans are reluctant to discuss social class. Yet the impact of class in determining a person's life circumstances and opportunities can be substantial. A careful sociocultural analysis of gender must disentangle the effects of culture, ethnicity, class, and privilege.

Final Thoughts

Sociocultural analyses of the lives of women and men offer the promise of new insights and increased understanding of important human experiences. A sociocultural perspective also poses challenges for feminist scholars.

Feminists have criticized traditional social science theory and research for generalizing about people based on the experiences of White, privileged men (Yoder & Kahn, 1993). This androcentric bias was reflected in the tendency to exclude women and other groups from study and to evaluate them against a White male standard. In correcting this male-centered bias, it is important that scholars not simply substitute a new and equally inaccurate female standard, based on the experiences of White, privileged women. Just as there is no essential or universal man, so there is no essential or universal woman (Spelman, 1988). At the same time, researchers also recognize that it would be "a tremendous mistake to conclude that 'all individuals are totally unique and different' and . . . therefore all generalizations about social groups are impossible and inherently oppressive" (Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 1997, p. 1). Analyses of women and men from diverse cultural groups provide one avenue for striking a balance between these two extremes.

Central to the sociocultural analysis of gender is the recognition that gender and culture are inseparable. Jeffries and Ransford (1980) used the term *unique social space* to refer to the distinctive social environment created when gender, ethnicity, class, and age intersect in particular combinations. Examples would be wealthy middle-aged White men, third-generation Japanese American women, or teenage African

American girls. The point is that we cannot understand the experiences of a Black teenage girl simply by adding together the categories to which she belongs, trying to sum the "effects" of being young, Black, and female (cf. Smith & Stewart, 1983). Rather, we need to understand the experiences of people who inhabit this particular social niche within American society. Of course, even groups such as Black teenage girls are heterogeneous, and we cannot assume that all African American adolescent girls are identical in their interests, values, or life experiences (cf. Morawski & Bayer, 1995). Nonetheless, efforts to study gender within specific sociocultural contexts will greatly enhance our understanding.

As researchers focus increasingly on the intersection of gender, culture, and ethnicity, we will become more skilled in our research methods and more sophisticated in our theory development. The readings in this volume present some of the very best available research and clearly demonstrate the value of sociocultural analyses of gender.

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