Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice: Back to the Future

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Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice: Back to the Future

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SUMMARY. In this paper we examine the history and future directions of ethnic sensitive social work practice. We highlight the context within which the approach was developed and current sociodemographic trends. The various rights movements of the sixties and seventies pointed to the need to refocus on social class and ethnicity. The new demographic
landscape, largely a function of immigration policies, reinforces the importance of concepts such as the ethnic reality and other aspects of our work. doi:10.1300/J051v16n03_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Ethnic reality, ethnic identity, social class, second generation immigrants, new immigrants, ethnic ancestry

**INTRODUCTION**

We begin this article with a great deal of excitement. It is a singular honor to have been asked to reflect on ethnic sensitive social work practice, how our work first developed, how it has evolved, and our perspective on the future.

Before we begin this overview, we would like to review the process that has led us to this point in our social work careers. We were both junior faculty at the School of Social Work at Rutgers University, one of us an African American woman, the other a Jewish American woman with some roots in the Holocaust. We had been teaching together, introducing content on race and class and ethnicity into the curriculum, and experimenting with a variety of ways to teach this perplexing material (Devore & Schlesinger, 1977).

There was limited literature on which to draw. Social work had paid virtually no attention to how ethnicity and social class issues were to be incorporated into practice. Importantly, some African American and Latino students thought the literature focused primarily on the presumed pathology of people of color. And so we began to write and do our own research (Schlesinger & Devore, 1977).

We talked about what it felt like to be African American, mothers, atheist, cultural Jew and refugee from the Holocaust, and committed Christian. Sometimes we clashed, but more often we agreed.

There was no doubt in our minds—based on personal, practice, and teaching experience as well as knowledge of the literature—that ethnicity affects our sense of ourselves, contributes to a sense of cohesion and sometimes to conflict. The importance of social class was also self-evident. While both of us had grown up poor, we were now thoroughly ensconced in the middle class and knew the difference well. Both positions have affected much of who we are as individuals.
From this it followed that ethnicity and social class affect those aspects of life with which social workers deal. It was out of these experiences and thinking that the major ideas presented in our work evolved.

It has been more than twenty-five years since the first edition of *Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice* was published (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981). When the original galleys were on display at the Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education in Louisville, Kentucky in 1981, people stopped to look, to peek, and gave us the impression that the time for a work of this nature had come. The first formal review in *Social Work* supported that view (Chestang, 1982). Within the first few months of the book’s publication, “ethnic sensitive” seemed to have become a part of our professional lexicon. Over the years, we applied the basic concepts to work on the family (Devore, 1983), to health care (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981), to Black/Jewish Relations (Schlesinger & Devore, 2001), and to new immigrants (Schlesinger & Devore, 2006).

For us, the basic concept is really quite simple. We essentially present the view that ethnicity and social class are key aspects of social functioning that need to be understood by social workers and incorporated into practice. Twenty-six years later we are pleased that most of the ideas originally presented remain viable. It is our view that we are all ethnics—no matter what the group. We have drawn on classic sociological literature on ethnicity and social class to develop our themes (e.g., Gordon, 1964).

Because racism and oppression of people of color were major aspects of American life—and still remain virulent—we have continued to stress social work’s obligation to act to minimize oppression of all people. That people of color are especially oppressed in this country is a theme that recurs throughout our work. The effects of the major political and social movements of the sixties and seventies for civil rights, for women’s rights, for gay rights and others informed our early work. These were underway then and are still in process.

Certainly we were not sufficiently prescient to foresee the dramatic developments that this country and the rest of the world would experience within the next twenty-five years. Particularly, we recognize the many demographic changes that were generated in large part by 1965 changes in immigration laws that revised entrenched policy that had limited entry to preferred European groups.

The world is a significantly different place now than when we first began our work. Yet, unfortunately, many of the problems we identified then remain with us. This overview examines some of the changes that
inevitably affect our thinking. We try to capture the dynamic between continuity and change and the shape of ethnic sensitive practice of the future.

Our discussion begins with the presentation of a series of concepts that are key to our work. Some of these concepts are used frequently in the literature, but the several meanings often differ.

The “Changing Demographic Landscape” is presented next, highlighting the diversity of our changing population. This is followed by a discussion of ethnic identity and then “becoming part of American society,” language we prefer to the classic notion of “assimilation” which has come under considerable scrutiny. Next we present an overview about the new immigrants. We discuss the “ethnic reality” and its implication for practice. We finish the paper with closing comments, examining whether our conceptualization and focus on the ethnic reality is still relevant for social work practice and education today.

**ETHNIC SENSITIVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: BASIC CONCEPTS AND RELATED DEFINITIONS**

*Culture* is a frequently used word, with many meanings. Out of the many definitions we have studied, we use the term as a broad, overriding concept that revolves around the view that human groups differ in the way they structure their behavior, in their world view, in their perspectives on the rhythms and patterns of life, and how they perceive the essential nature of the human condition on matters such as the relationship between humans, the spirits, and the Gods (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999).

Some use the term culture to refer to different groups, as if they are “cultures.” Others equate the term with ethnicity or ethnic groups. We make a clear distinction between ethnic groups and ethnicity and broad, overriding cultural themes.

*Ethnic Groups.* The basic view of ethnic groups developed in mid-20th century remains relevant. Some common themes converge: that ethnic groups share a common set of beliefs, common history, common religion, often similar physical features, a common language or some combination of these factors. Important is the view that the ethnic group serves as “a psychological referent” (Gordon, cited in Marger, 1996) and, importantly, that there is a sense of peoplehood. This affinity generates a comfort zone, when people congregate in their own groups.

Ethnic groups share a consciousness of kind, a sense of being like others and a sense of identity based on a shared history. Much of our
daily life is in some ways impacted by the ethnic group, and how that
group interprets universal events and fundamental cultural tenets. In to-
day’s world, people of different ethnic groups intermarry leading to
ways people adapt and shift their sense of themselves.

It is our view that we are all ethnics, members of distinct groups, for
example, Irish, Puerto Rican, or African American. Conceptually, we
all share the features reviewed above. Given racism and oppression faced
by many people of color, we have suggested (Devore & Schlesinger,
1999) that these groups—African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos
and Native Americans—be referred to as oppressed ethnic groups.

Race. We share the view held by many social scientists that race is a
pejorative and destructive term, based on oppression and power issues,
not on scientifically established biological distinctions between differ-
ent peoples. The consequences of racial designations have long been
destructive for too many people in this world.

Social Class is about inequality. The term refers to the horizontal
stratification of the population related to economic life and to differ-
ences based on wealth, income, occupation, status, community power
and other related matters. Commonly, in the United States, the popula-
tion is divided into three or five levels. The most simple designation is
upper, middle, and lower or working class. Position in the class struc-
ture is determined by the interaction between education, occupation and
income. There is a considerable literature that suggests that many be-
haviors are a function of social class, including differences in achievement
motivation, in perspectives on the importance of education, on gender
issues as well as in matters of child rearing. The three social class vari-
bles in concert have considerable predictive power (Conley, 1999).

The Ethnic Reality. This concept was introduced early in our work
and is the foundation of much of this work. The ethnic reality consti-
tutes an integration of the person’s experience of ethnicity and social
class and the impact this has on all aspects of his/her life, including view
of self and present and future opportunities. Its significance is discussed
and illustrated in a later section of this paper.

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

Overall Population Growth and Change

Between 1990 and 2000 the population of the United States grew by
13% or by 32.7 million people, the largest census to census increase in
American history (U.S. Census 2000; Community Survey, 2005); now, 10 years later, as of date of paper submission, August 7, 2007, at 17:57, the population of the United States was 302,544,804 (Census Clock, August 7, 2007).

Immigration is a key factor explaining this population growth, and continues apace. The increase in numbers of the population, together with the variety of immigrant ethnic groups, with their languages, their broad cultural precepts, and each with their unique coping styles, has had a profound impact on all of the American ways of life. Following is an overview of population statistics presenting a brief picture of current population distribution.¹

African Americans are 12.1% of the population and Latinos, now the largest oppressed ethnic group, are at 14.6%. Asian Americans are 4.3% while Native Americans are under one percent (Census 2000: We the People: Asians in the United States, We the People: Hispanics in the United States). Oppressed ethnic groups constitute over 31% of our population. Less than 70% of the population is White. However, a view of these data for the nation as a whole does not tell the whole story. Many cities have lost considerable segments of their White population where more than half of the population is non-White. Overall, the top 100 cities saw a net reduction in the non-Hispanic White population of 2.3 million. The five largest cities lost nearly 1 million White residents. Growth of the Hispanic population was dramatic in most cities, a 43% increase over 1990 levels (Brookings Institution Center, 2001).

The census also asks a sample of the population to list the ancestry group with which they identify. Ancestry data are available for all groups, and the only extensive source of information in the census about the background of the White population. How much meaning their ancestry has for the White ethnics, or whether they have thoroughly assimilated into some “core” culture is in dispute, and is a matter to which we return later in this work. The five largest European ancestry groups listed in descending order are German, Irish, English, Italian and Polish (Ancestry, 2000). One group, Jewish people, is not covered in the census, because it is considered a religious group, although in our view it also qualifies as an ethnic group. As of 2004, there were around six million Jewish people in the United States (http://buff/c052302.htm). Between 1990 and 2000, there was a 20% decline in the three largest European ancestry groups—German, Irish and English. Nevertheless, there is a continuing migration from European countries; they are now 9.6% of the total number of new immigrants (Census 2000, Ancestry).
Populations of increasing interest, though small in number, are Arabs. Census 2000 reported that there were 850,000 people of Arab ancestry, including people from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Morocco and others (Census 2000: We the People of Arab Ancestry in the United States, 2000).

**Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity essentially involves a sense of belonging. Important is the psychological attachment to the group. Citing Coleman and Rainwater (1978), Waters (1990) suggests that ethnicity adds spice to life in a postindustrial world; in a highly mobile population ethnic identity is important to people because it gives them a sense of heritage and roots.

As we go about our lives—as women and men, significant others, children, parents, workers—we approach life from some sense of who we are at core, a part of which is ethnic identity. For some, whether to share that identity is a matter of choice. People of color, whose identity is clearly visible, often sense subtle or direct negative responses to who they are. Intergroup tensions can surface subtly and intrude on the primary interaction. If we have learned to appreciate others and ourselves, our respective identities with their commonalities and differences can heighten the interaction.

Where the implicit or explicit answer to the question “Who am I”? is couched in terms of ethnic identity, many facets of life are likely to follow. Often it is pride in the group. When one is a member of a marginalized group, pride and anger may be intertwined. Many in this situation have experienced positive or negative, hurtful or embracing responses.

Ethnic identity is an important component of development. The 1950 work of Eric H. Erikson describes a time during which a developing person must establish a “sense of personal identity.” Ethnic identity is an important component of personal identity. For second generation immigrant adolescents, there are a variety of identities available: to be an “American,” a hyphenated American (e.g., Cambodian-American), a national origin person (e.g., Jamaican), or a panethnic identity (e.g., Latino, Asian). The adaptation of an ethnic identity and the establishment of ethnic loyalties may influence behavior and an outlook independent of the family’s status (Rumbaut, 1996).

As children become more aware of their ethnic identity, they are likely to experience racial and ethnic discrimination. Each group is able to report experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment. Adolescents,
who have such experiences, may develop incidents of depression and a pessimistic attitude. Still, there are others, though aware of discrimination related to the complexion of their skin, are able to affirm the belief in the promise of equality and claim their future as citizens of the United States.

As children from other countries settle here in the United States, the question of an ethnic identity looms large and may be confusing. There may be parental pressure to retain the “old ways,” including retention of the native language, staying within the ethnic community, and engaging in familiar behaviors. At the same time, as they are trying to develop a sense of self that includes the habits and customs of this country, parental pressure appears to stand in their way. It becomes important to help families to find ways to retain pride in ongoing traditions while allowing the young people to move forward in the new country. In this respect the issues move beyond the formal declaration of being an American or a hyphenated American; they become part and parcel of the daily pulsing of life as people move within the family and between the family and the outer world. Recent studies serve to support this aspect of the development of an ethnic identity for many young people in immigrant families (e.g., Germain & Lien, 2005).

Zhou and Xiong (2005) have reviewed data from “The Second Generation and the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study” pertaining to how the Asians in the study identified themselves. Virtually none of the people in their 20’s identified as unhyphenated Americans with the exception of some Japanese who were likely already in the third or fourth generation. Most identified as hyphenated Americans. To declare oneself as an unhyphenated American would also mean one identified as “White” since many of this group equate America with whiteness. This is true for many, including those who are fairly well acculturated, intermarry, and work hard toward gaining privileged middle class status.

Color, complexion, texture of hair, and facial features are declarations of membership in many oppressed ethnic groups. Patton (2006) explores self-image and racial identity in the lives of African American women and their struggles with beauty, body image, and hair. She suggests that for these women, having a White standard of beauty continually placed before them has often been destructive to the development of clear identity as a dark woman with an African heritage.

Members of White ethnic groups have choices in claiming an ethnic identity that is seldom available to persons of color. Although there is little question that there is a seeming comfort of membership in White ethnic groups, stereotypes persist. For example, a coalition of Italian
American organizations in Illinois filed a suit against a school board that permitted the presentation of a play that depicted Italians as uneducated and as mobsters (DeSantis, 2007). The highly successful film “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” has offended some Greek Americans, because it fails to break perceptions of Greek Americans as painting contractors and café owners. In either instance, affirmation of pride in ethnic identity has been called into question. However, negative images about a group can also reinforce ethnic identity. The effects may be to increase people’s resolve to strengthen themselves and their group. Unfortunately, for some people, the onslaught of negative messages can be devastating.

Families will go to great length to provide experiences for their children which they hope will reinforce and strengthen children’s ethnic identities. European ethnics have long sent their children to Hebrew School, and others, including new immigrant groups such as Ukrainians, to schools where the native language and customs are taught (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999), reinforcing the ethnic identity transmitted through the family, religious, and other ethnic institutions, including ethnic based social services that have long been developed as a way of reaching out to “one’s own.”

As social workers work with people, we try to help them to draw on their ethnic identity as a source of strength highlighting the group’s resources as a way of dealing with the problems.

**Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity**

Marriage to a person not of one’s group, an increasingly common experience in this country, inevitably has an effect on people’s ethnic identity. Engaging in one of the world’s most intimate relationship with a person who does not share one’s ethnic identity almost inevitably involves some rethinking of the degree of commitment to one’s own group. Further, many families, often even those from whom one would least expect it, cast a jaundiced eye on the prospect. The extent to which such marriages may involve differences in religious observances, how holidays are spent, and related matters can affect daily life. Perlman and Waters (2007) suggest that “intermarriage has played havoc with simple definitions of ethnic origin and generation by the time the grandchildren of the immigrants come of age” (p. 111). Intermarriage clearly generates multiple identities with major consequences for the way we think about ourselves and our interaction with other people. Studies of intermarriage look at how often people cross the boundaries
of the broad racial groups to form couples, the ultimate consequence of an increasingly diverse society.

**BECOMING PART OF AMERICAN SOCIETY**

During the planning of this work, we determined that there would be a portion with a particular focus on “assimilation” given the importance of immigration at the beginning of the 21st century. Assimilation is what we who think and write about ethnicity have long called the process by which newcomers make their way in this country. However, based on a review of some of the important current thought on the subject, we came to the conclusion that perhaps the concept of assimilation was not the only, nor perhaps the best way to think about this subject, a point made by Alba and Nee (2007). They point out that many people view the term as “an ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on the minority people struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity” (p. 124).

The pre-1965 history of immigration—its trials and its joys—has been told by us and others (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999). Our focus here is on the present group of immigrants, and what the experience of the earlier groups can tell us about the newcomers.

Much of the discussion of “assimilation” has focused on whether and how newcomers come to participate in the economic mainstream, whether they speak English, and to what extent they adopt the main customs of the society. Questions persist as to whether ethnic identity persists well past the point of initial adaptation, including into the second and subsequent generations.

**Persistence of Ethnicity**

A major area of continuing interest has focused on the persistence of ethnicity, and whether and to what extent immigrants retain a sense of identity with their original ethnic groups. Much study has been centered on whether second and subsequent generations retain command of the native language, whether they identify with the group’s customs and values, whether they tend to intermarry or marry out of their native group, and how involved they are in carrying out ethnic rituals, such as customary holiday celebration.

Analysts focusing on the experience of the post-1965 immigrants have been looking at what happened to the European ethnics as a way of understanding what is likely to happen to the current group of newcomers.
When we reviewed the literature on the persistence of ethnicity among Europeans, it seemed that there were two worlds of scientific scholarship. One group of analysts has come to the conclusion that distinctive ethnic groups among the Europeans are a thing of the past (Hirschman, 1991). Another group takes the position that on the daily matters of life, as for example, when it comes to matters of mental health, ethnic group differences loom large.

Support for the view expressed by Hirschman (1991) comes from extensive intermarriage among European ethnics, the fact that few know the ethnic language or have ethnic political concerns, “... to put the matter simply, there is very little left of ethnicity for most white Americans” (p. 181).

Portes and Rumbaut (2005) share this view. They contend that children of European immigrants learned English, gradually abandoned their parents’ language and “clawed their ways through schools and entrepreneurship into economic affluence... By the third generation, foreign languages were a distant memory and ethnic identities were social conveniences, displayed on selected occasions, but subordinate to overwhelming American selves” (pp. 985-986).

McGoldrick, Giordano, and Pearce (1996), who have studied the whole range of ethnic groups, suggest that ethnic groups differences become evident when people experience mental health problems and other life crises. In their view, many social science researchers have failed to realize that when European Americans who consider themselves to be fully assimilated experience periods of stress and personal difficulty, they often return to familiar sources of comfort, including ethnic rituals and behaviors. According to many authors included in their 1996 work, any number of examples of the retention of differences can be identified; there are those that have almost become part of the common lore: the overprotective Jewish mother, the stoic English, and the humor and pathos of the Irish. Our own review of work on European ethnics found throughout our work (e.g., Devore & Schlesinger, 1999) points to many areas of daily life where people draw on their ethnic background as they deal with life. These include responses to matters of physical as well as mental health, and to decision making around how to care for the elderly in their families.

In our view, ethnicity persists among European ethnics, precisely in the areas of social work concern, no matter whether they have achieved middle class status or have intermarried. People who are stoic in the face of pain pose different diagnostic challenges to physicians than those who are especially voluble. The same is true when a social worker
is trying to assess whether a particular parent-child relationship is “pathologically enmeshed” or is characteristic of the customs of the ethnic group to which the clients belong. Our own personal experience, and that of the many students with whom we have worked over the years, supports the view of the persistence of ethnicity. Clearly, the degree of persistence varies for European ethnics as it does for any other group. Our task, as social workers, is to discern the impact of the difference in respect to the situation at hand.

**Social Class and Race as Factors in Becoming Part of American Society**

There are clear differences between the new immigrants and those of an earlier period. Major among these is the fact that most of the new immigrants are considered “racial and ethnic minorities,” thus limiting the likelihood of full assimilation. Xie and Greenman (2007) in their analysis of segmented assimilation theory, outline several possible assimilation paths. One follows the traditional path into the middle class. The second is acculturation and assimilation into the urban underclass, resulting in poverty and downward mobility. In this group are those, like some Haitians, who, facing barriers to a comfortable life, become part of the seriously disadvantaged group of young Blacks.

A third involves purposeful preservation of the immigrant community’s values (Xie & Greenman, 2007). This perspective is based on the fact that the United States is a highly stratified and unequal society. Given this, people will assimilate into different segments of the society. Fernandez-Kelly and Konczal (2005) put it this way: “social class plays a role in ‘segmenting’ the fate of children” (p. 1177). There are also those whose families have or develop resources, who remain immersed in the ethnic community, and have limited contact with groups other than their own. Foner and Kasinitz (2007) find that connections with the ethnic enclaves of the parents does not facilitate upward mobility. However, a strong connection can provide a safety net for those who are less successful.

It is clear, that the process long considered “assimilation” is no longer, if it ever was, a straight line into the middle class of White America. Analysts of considerable reputation have different points of view, each predicting different outcomes for the current groups of immigrants. Waters and her colleagues (2004, 2007) have an essentially optimistic outlook, as do Alba and Nee (2007), although their views on the likely long range outcome differ. Despite their differences, all have found that
the resources of the first generation have a major impact on the outcome of the second generation. When people come with few skills and limited if any education, the likelihood of a successful future for the next generation is worrisome. Foner and Kasinitz (2007) fear for the second generation of Mexican American immigrants. This group is large, and a high proportion of their parents have little education and work in low status occupations. They drop out of high school at high rates. Nevertheless, a large number do better in education and income than their parents.

From the perspective of ethnic sensitive practice, it is clear that the new immigrants, as well as substantial numbers of long resident people—Native Americans—face substantial problems, as well as growth and positive change.

The work of Portes and Rumbaut (2005) and that of Waters and her colleagues (2004) both explicitly and implicitly point to the role of social class in the lives of immigrants. Social class, together with the structure of beliefs and values of the various groups, have a significant impact on the second generation.

Becoming a part of American society is an ongoing process. In our view, as we have already stated, we are all ethnics. The degree to which ethnicity affects our daily life is a function of many complex, sometimes subtle, factors. It is too soon to dismiss ethnicity as a significant portion of the life of any individual or group.

THE NEW IMMIGRANTS

Here we refer essentially to the people who came to settle in this country following the 1965 changes in immigration policy. Our presentation is limited in scope and does not offer a complete description or analysis of the current group of newcomers. Rather, we present some key information about who the immigrants are, where they live, and some of their joys and sorrows as these have bearing on ethnic sensitive practice in the 21st Century.

Undocumented immigrants have been coming to this country in large numbers. The Census does not ask the foreign born if they are legal residents. However, the Census and a variety of other organizations have drawn on census data to estimate the size of this population. By March 2005, there were about 9.8 million undocumented residents of whom around six million are working. It is estimated that the undocumented residents account for about one half of the recent growth in the immigrant population (Urban Institute, 2004).
Income

Different groups have been participating in the economy and the educational system, but at differing rates. Comparing Asian and Latino incomes, (Census 2000–We the People: Asians in the United States, We the People: Latinos in the United States) we find that compared to all workers in the United States who (had median earnings of $37,057), Asian workers have the highest incomes. As a whole the mean earnings of Asian men were, in 1999, $40,650 and $31,049 for women. Comparable figures for all Latinos are $25,400 and $21,634. However, there are major within group differences. Among Asians, the highest earning groups are Asian Indian men ($51,904) and Japanese men ($50,876). Among Latinos, the highest earning groups are Cuban men ($31,527) and Spanish men ($39,628).

In the same year (1999), the poverty rate for the total population was 12.4%, for the overall Asian population, 12.6%, and for the overall Latino population, 22.6%. Within group differences were substantial. Among Asian Americans, the highest poverty rate was among the Hmong at 37.8% and the lowest among the Japanese and Asian Indians (9.7% and 9.8%). The comparable data for Latinos are 25.8% for Puerto Ricans and 27.5% for Dominicans with the lowest among Cubans (14.6%) and Spaniards (12.8%).

Comparable data on education, looking only at people with a bachelor’s degree or better, are in the same vein. Of the total population, as of 1999, 24.4% had at least a bachelor’s degree, as did 44.1% of Asians, and 10.4% of Latinos. The highest number of bachelor’s degrees among Asians were earned by Asian Indians 63.9%, and among Latinos, by South Americans (25.2%) and Cubans (21.2%).

Looking at these figures it is very clear that both Latinos and Asians have generated social class structures comparable to those of the American population as a whole with substantial gaps between the upper middle class and those at the lower end of the class ladder. Any type of social work intervention needs to be attuned to these differences, and how their social class status together with their ethnic group impact on their lives.

Residential Patterns

More than ever before, immigrants are settling in many areas of the country. A walk, a trip to the market, a glimpse into our schools, reveals the growing diversity almost everywhere. Nevertheless, in keeping with
a long standing pattern, the largest numbers of immigrants continue to live in the six states where many have been settling in this current cohort: California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey and Illinois. Immigrants have long favored cities and metropolitan areas as places to live, and this remains the case at present.

At present, they are more likely to live in central cities, 44% of the foreign born compared to 27% of the native born. At present, the largest number of foreign born live in: New York, 35.9% of the population, Los Angeles 41%, Chicago 22%, Houston 26.4% and Miami, almost 60%. But the newcomers are also coming to areas of the country where people are less familiar with the new immigrants who are largely Asians and Latinos. One source reports that a number of these areas have seen substantial increases in immigrant populations over the past period: Indiana, 34%, South Dakota, 44%, Delaware, 32%, and New Hampshire, 26%. Actually, the list goes on. None of these data sources distinguish between documented and undocumented workers (The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, 2001).

What is clear, is that a growing number of the new immigrants are living and working in all areas of the country. In some states they have come to work in relatively small cities that were experiencing a declining economy as plants began to close, and, in effect, helped to bring the cities out of economic doldrums (Shared Histories, Shared Hopes, 2003).

**A Brief Sketch of Immigrants Across the Country**

Pictures of immigrants are seen daily in the media. We see images of “illegals” crossing the border into Arizona and New Mexico, and parents of American born children being deported, leaving the children without their families.

We find people who speak little English working in hotels and restaurants and as gardeners and construction workers. We also see those with a better command of the language working in banks and other occupations requiring higher skills. As social work educators, we see students from far and wide in our classes, some struggling with the language while preparing for a career in our profession. Some are planning to return to work in their homeland, others want to stay here.

As social work practitioners we see people with a range of problems, not unlike those we see with all people. Some are specific to their immigration status. If they are undocumented, they are always fearful.

We have already presented data on their earnings and education. Behind those figures lurk data on poverty, especially of children. Fass and
Cauthen (2006) report that 26% of immigrant children are poor, and that having an immigrant parent increases the chances of being poor. First generation immigrants constitute one-sixth of the population of the United States, and one-fourth of all poor people in the United States (Rector, 2006).

The impact of poverty is well-known to social workers and needs little comment here, except to say that poor children are always our special concern. Poverty is highly interrelated with poor education and poor health.

Second Generation Immigrants

Much of the work on becoming part of America to which we have already referred points out that it is the experience of the second generation and beyond that will tell the tale of how this group of immigrants is making adaptations to this country. Portes and Rumbaut (2005) suggest that the first generation simply sets the stage for the next generation. A group of second generation young New Yorkers studied by Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters (2004) are described as people whose parents were immigrants, but who themselves were born and raised in the United States. They view themselves as very different from their parents, with different educational experiences; they think about race and ethnicity differently from their parents and hold differing views in relation to love, marriage, and family relationships, viewing themselves as mainstream Americans daily balancing their ethnic heritage with their “Americaness.” A series of studies in Becoming New Yorkers (2004) highlights the varied experiences of the range of Latino and Asian American second generation. The studies show, for the most part, that ethnic dispositions intersect with their parents social class disposition, and how they are received in this country to affect their fate as Americans.

Several of these studies highlight the differences between social classes within the same larger ethnic group. For example, Louie (2004) shows that pre-college age Chinese men and women, children of small entrepreneurs (restaurants, laundries), select public colleges in New York City, whereas those whose parents are highly educated “head for the ivies.” The value placed on education in both class groups is similar. Young Koreans who have not been as successful as is expected, shy away from a Korean identity, because not to have succeeded is a failure in the eyes of other young Korean Americans (Lee, 2004). Rumbaut (1996) also considers the adaptive experiences of the second generation.
in a description of dissonant acculturation as the experience of growing up in a family when children learn English and American ways. The potential for a gap between language and other ethnic traditions is significant. Conflicts between generations become evident as children are embarrassed by adults who attempt to fit in with American peers. The stress of adolescence along with the need to adapt to the larger society are issues that are not uncommon in families of second-generation adolescents. These intergenerational relationships will be mediated within the family in relation to a variety of circumstances, including parent’s socioeconomic position, family structure, peer networks as well as school context. As it may well be during adolescence of any ethnic group, there is the impact of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

The One-and-a-Half (1.5) Generation

One-and-a-half (1.5) generation immigrants have been identified as young people who have spent their developmental years in the United States, but who were born in their parents’ countries of origin. Their adaptation experiences are unlike those of second-generation youth or adult immigrants. Studies related to the experiences of 1.5 generation Koreans determined that these individuals have been able to operate proficiently within and between Korea and the United States environments. One-and-a-half generation people have been said to have high degrees of socialization in the United States and indigenous culture as well. Given this agility with language, this generation is called upon to serve as family “cultural brokers,” responsible for translation in family and public matters. Respondents in the Kim, Brenner, Lang, and Asay (2003) study strongly identified with U.S. culture, trying to become as “Americanized” as possible, but at the same time revealed in the rich culture of their countries of origin in behaviors such as Filipino humility and respect for family and elders.

Instances of discrimination and racism were again experienced to varying degrees from friendliness in predominately White neighborhoods to being bullied by members of other ethnic groups, having teachers make racist remarks, being asked ignorant questions regarding ethnic stereotypes, or teasing related to accents. In addition there were reports of discrimination from members of their own ethnic groups. Still, they have been able to establish relationships with people from different ethnic groups (Kim, Brenner, Lang, & Asay, 2003).
Adding to the scant literature related to this population is an examination of the experiences of one-and-a-half generation Mexican youth who were students attending the University of Oregon (Gonzales-Berry, Mendoza, & Plaza, 2006). Their parents had entered the United States as undocumented workers who took agricultural jobs. Eventually they were able to become permanent residents. These students and other one-and-a-half generation children arrived speaking only Spanish. Soon they became bilingual, but their younger Spanish-speaking siblings soon became linked to English, abandoning their native language. This experience is much like that of second-generation children who are familiar with the language of their parents, but tend to speak English primarily.

Students recalled early experiences in the United States, where they discovered that “color” could be a burden added to a variety of experiences of structural discrimination in school with peers, faculty, and staff. Given our concern about childhood and adolescent development, we recognize the damage that such experiences may do as young people mature. Peers and older siblings whose negative experiences have left them disaffected may encourage behaviors that reject the values of family and community. However, again as in other immigrant groups, family and community offer support. Educational aspirations and expectations advocated by immigrants’ parents might persist in spite of deterrents.

Like 1.5 generation Asian college students (Kim, Brenner, Lang, & Asay, 2003), these youth claim identity as Americans as well as Mexicans. They have no doubt that they belong to this country, having chosen the best of Mexico and the United States as they sculpted their own identities. One student’s remarks may well synthesize the experience of many,

I would like to live here, not in Mexico, because my family is here. I have relatives in Mexico there, but I have more security here. I feel that I don’t belong there anymore. The experiences of my relatives in Mexico have been different from mine. I have more passion to fight against injustices here.

THE ETHNIC REALITY

The “ethnic reality” is a concept we first introduced in 1981 (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981). It is the conceptual base of the model of ethnic sensitive practice derived from sociological stratification theory. Derived from Gordon’s discussion (1964) of “ethclass” as a way of thinking...
about the differences in outlook between people at the same social class level, but members of different ethnic groups, Gordon thought that social class is of primary importance as a determinant of the basic conditions of life, a perspective that we have shared and continue to share. The basic premise is that social class as an amalgam of education, occupation and income, as earlier described, in large measure determines our life chances. It affects what we can buy, where we can afford to live, where we can send our children to school, what kind of health care to which we have access, and importantly, the kind of work we do. These are all connected to the chances we have for a comfortable life or one of economic hardship and struggle.

As best as we can determine, we remain among the few, if any, analysts who focus on social class status as a way of thinking about various groups, whether White, people of color, or immigrants. Much more of the work of other analysis has focused on “culture.” More recently, Fong touched on the intersect between culture and social class (Fong, 2004). As already pointed out, analysis of post-1965 immigrants has begun to focus on social class. For example, Fernandez–Kelly and Konczal (2005) suggests that social class most broadly determines personal and collective options. They view class, ethnicity, and race as overlapping; identities are formed along these dimensions and are considered cultural capital which contribute to group identity.

Each ethnic and class configuration of the various groups, taken together, highlights key features of social life and begins to explain both commonality and variation between the groups.

These configurations and the cluster of outlooks they represent variously reflect perspectives on matters ranging from political outlook to views on child rearing, to features of family life, and responses to health and illness. At the same time, people who continue to believe in some of the traditional views on the cause and treatment of illness—people still immersed in traditional belief systems—will differ from those socialized to Western traditions.

We have used the “ethnic reality” to analyze key features of life as they bear on ethnicity and social class and related concepts. For example, over the years we have analyzed the similarities and differences between African Americans at various points on the class structure, highlighting how common oppression can join those who have benefited economically from life in the United States to those at the lower rungs; both are suffering from racism. Reference has also been made to the situation of American Indians who feel a tension between what they are expected to do at work as members of the American work force, as
people who reside on a social class stratum, and with regard to obliga-
tions to family, so deeply ingrained in American Indian ethnic disposi-
tions.

Today it is said that American Jews are largely middle class. Yet,
data show that there are poor Jewish people, especially among the el-
derly and more recent Jewish immigrants from Russia (National Jewish
Population Survey, 2007). Here too, the impact of group expectations
clash with individual economic realities. In contrast, some young Afri-
can Americans have developed the view that to do well in school and
rise in the class structure is in conflict with being loyal to one’s group.
For some, these are powerful beliefs, which they believe are essential to
the maintenance of their group; in turn, these beliefs hold some back
from developing the knowledge and skills expected in this society.

Most recently (Schlesinger & Devore, 2006), we analyzed the situa-
tion of Asian and Latino Americans, many of them fairly recent immi-
grants, to determine whether the concepts embedded in the “ethnic
reality” were useful to understand their lives. We found that Asians as a
whole and Latinos as a whole, are distributed along the American social
class structure in a fashion characteristic of all the people of the United
States.

Earlier, in the discussion of the new immigrants, we presented key in-
come and education figures, as well as class distribution for Latino and
Asian populations. In analyzing the experiences of some Asian and La-
tino groups, the Asian Indians and Hmong among the Asians, and Do-
mnicans and Cubans among the Latinos, it became clear that reference
to the broad Asian and Latino cultural perspectives were not sufficient
to understand their specific experiences as immigrants. Rather, the con-
cept of the ethnic reality, and its focus, the convergence of social class
and ethnicity, is more useful because it allows us to integrate their long
standing cultural and ethnic precepts with their current social class status.
Asian Indians are among the best educated and have the best incomes of
all of these groups. Many of the Asian Indian immigrants were sought
after by the United States when this country found itself in need of people
with high level technological and other professional skills.

These Asian Indians have been able to achieve without giving up
many of their ethnic dispositions. Many maintain the custom of wearing
traditional clothing, of parental selection of a spouse for their children,
and extensive, ongoing involvement with the extended family, community
and religion (from U.S. Census Press Releases http://www.census.gov/
Press-release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_e; Lal,
2007). The Hmong, by contrast, fled from their country after having little
choice but to participate in the war in Laos in the 1960’s and early 1970’s. They are a very rural people; many on first arrival illiterate in their own language have no ability to understand or speak English. In addition, they have been found to be very much immersed in their own religious practices (History and Culture of the Hmong People, 2006). As the years since their initial migration have increased, many more Hmong are becoming integrated into the lives of their communities; however, for some it is difficult to give up the old ties (Davey, 2007).

Dominicans, among the lowest paid and least educated of the Latino groups, have come as migrant laborers, carrying out poorly paid, low status work. They share the behavior of many immigrants, of leaving their country with the hope that they will be able to bring their families to the United States or of returning home for a more comfortable life. Unfortunately, too often they did not find a welcome. Lopez’s (2004) study of a New York City High School where many Dominican students are enrolled, depicts the school as dilapidated, badly maintained, and little optimism among students or their teachers about their educability.

By contrast, many Cubans, especially those who escaped from the Castro regime were welcomed and resources were made available. Unlike their Dominican peers, many were highly educated or experienced in business when they arrived. They soon formed close communities, especially in Florida, which served as high level supports. Fernandez-Kelly and Konczal (2005) cite the experiences of several groups of Cubans in Florida, where the class position of the family interacts with the reception received in the United States to shape the lives of the second generation. They believe, as we do that “social class most broadly determines personal and collective options” (p. 1157).

It seemed to us, that this mode of analysis as a way of explaining the lives of different groups allows us to see that ethnically-based dispositions come to play in daily life and interact with social class and its impact on life. The Asian Indians and the Hmong both derive their basic cultural precepts from Asian culture: its view of people to people relationship and the importance of incorporating the gods and spirits into one’s life. However, the Asian Indian and the Hmong experience, both before migration and life in the United States are much more affected by the more current ethnic and class dispositions. Each group has a different set of religious beliefs and different access to education, matters that ultimately determine how they will fare in this country.

In our teaching, we have also used the “ethnic reality” as a way of analyzing case material and assessing how class and ethnicity are shaping and contributing to the problems about which they are seeing the social
worker. Social class, as a factor explaining the lives of the people seen by social workers, has been sorely neglected in our literature and in our practice. Ethnicity, or sometimes culture, without reference to social class does not focus sufficiently on how these factors work together to affect our lives. For these and related reasons we believe that “the ethnic reality” is a useful analytic concept.

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

We began this paper by pointing to the dramatic changes that have taken place in this country since we first began our work, more than 25 years ago. In these closing comments then, a major question for us is whether these changes have been of such a nature as to require major reformulation or recasting of our work.

Our major impetus for writing *Ethnic Sensitive Social Work Practice* was that social work, both in practice and education, had paid insufficient attention to ethnicity and social class. Although there were a number of works that did address related issues, there was virtually nothing that dealt with the integration of this type of understanding into practice; rather, there had been a tendency to consider these matters as background material, important to know, but not really to use.

Much has changed in this respect. There is a growing, rich literature, and related content is a required part of social work education. A lot of this work differs from ours in many respects. Major among these differences is our emphasis on social class as an important factor in life, especially when it is integrated with understanding of people’s ethnic group membership.

Our review of various theories of assimilation has shown that indeed social class plays a major factor in the lives of the newcomers. With few exceptions, analysts who differ in other respects make this point. The socioeconomic starting place of the first generation, whether of low skill, limited economic resources and education, or considerable social capital and middle class status, have major impact on the subsequent generation.

Zhou and Xiong (2005) highlight the impact of racism on the new immigrants. Those who are in the lower class groups are only minimally protected by their ethnically and culturally-honed coping styles. Like the rest of the society, they are caught in the travails of a racist, capitalist society.
Present and future immigrants, especially the undocumented, are under assault. As they function in a society that is so ambivalent about their presence, a layer of fear is added to their ongoing effort to become a part of America. We have all seen and heard about the raids on their homes and places of work, sometimes sweeping those with green cards in the net. Social work has a special obligation to advocate for and protect this group of people, and the contribution they make to this country.

Also relatively unique and different from other social work analysts is our view that “we are all ethnics.” Much of the other literature focuses on what we call oppressed ethnic groups, virtually having wiped “off the map” European Americans and other groups that don’t neatly fit into this categorization. Indeed, many who have been more than complimentary about our work have the impression that we are all about “minority” issues.

This has been troublesome for us in many ways. As our discussion has shown, about 70% of Americans are White, a significant number of them are members of the working class and are poor, and many have the types of problems that bring them to social workers. For the past twenty plus years, we have not been educating our students for practice with a large number of Americans. Our accreditation requirements have appropriately stressed vulnerable populations, but have excluded so many of them.

From an ideological point of view, this exclusion if you will, of White populations from our syllabi and our literature has created a “we-them” situation between students of color and all others. For White students, it subtly reinforced a sense of superiority, for it was “them” not me, who needed to be understood.

As our population has become more diverse, it is more necessary than ever to take the view that we are all ethnics, or all people, whose lives need to be understood if social workers are to be effective. The list of the American people is long; we need to find a way of educating ourselves about them, without making lists of who is in, and who is out.

We located ethnic sensitive practice within the broader framework of practice theories and interventive approaches, all the while suggesting how long-honed practice knowledge and skill need to be adapted to the ethnic- and class-based beliefs and habits of the people with whom we work. Since we began, there has been much rich work done on the strengths and empowerment perspectives. We were most pleased when some of the people who worked on these new perspectives suggested that our work had contributed the groundwork needed to move in this...
direction (Lee, 2001). We have much to learn from these approaches and look forward to incorporating their themes in our own work.

In answer to our own question as to whether our work needs fundamental reformulation and restructuring, we immodestly say no. We have paid a lot of attention in this paper to the new immigrants, because it is imperative that social workers understand this population. This highly focused look has helped to highlight key features of our perspective. For us, the concept of the ethnic reality has reinforced the importance of social class in American society. We will continue to address the concerns of all people—recognizing the special concerns of oppressed ethnic groups.

NOTE

1. The major source for these data are various documents from the United States Census 2000 and population estimates of the 2005 American Community Survey.

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