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ETHNICITY AND THE LIFE COURSE

This chapter examines the universal movement of individuals through the life course from entry to old age. The manner of the movement and the response to the stress and strain as well as the joy it invokes are influenced by ethnic group membership as well as social class position. Ethnic groups have time-honored rituals related to birth, the movement into adolescence, and death that serve to reinforce ethnic identity and social status.

We will discuss the work of several theorists in relation to their notions of the nature of the movement through time.

THE LIFE COURSE CONCEPT

The ethnic-sensitive response to individual movement through time is directly related to the ethnic reality. This consideration suggests that movement will not be as universal as we may have thought. Germain (1990) asked for a reconsideration of the stage model of individual development and suggested the term life course. This “refers to the unique paths of development people take in varied environments, as well as their varied life experiences from birth to old age” (pp. 138–139). In addition, the life course concept assumes that individual developmental processes take place in the context of families and other groups and considers the meaning of race, ethnicity, social class, and gender socialization. Sexual orientation and disability are considered as well.

Elder (1978), an early proponent of the life course perspective, refers to the documentation of change within families dating from the turn of the twentieth century. The earliest research in family life cycle experiences was a 1901 study in York, England. Most life course offerings have been developed since 1955; Germain may be included in that number. Elder and Germain pay particular attention to cohort experiences, life span development, life history, and the temporal structure of life events. Elder claims that “life course refers to the pathways through the age-differentiated life span, to the social patterns in the timing, duration, spacing, and order of events” (p. 21).
An African American male born in 1900 experienced segregation, perhaps the Ku Klux Klan, World Wars I and II, the Civil Rights Movement, integration of public schools, and desegregation of the armed forces, and gained the right to vote. An Italian American male born at the same time may have experienced segregation but it was not "the law," he was not segregated in the armed forces, he and his parents could vote, and the civil rights movement may well have called attention to the joy of ethnic group membership.

An individual's life history is embedded in historical time. Social workers hear life histories in the assessment process. The query, "tell me about it" invites the life story. Autobiographies of the famous and not-so-famous recount various ethnic experiences. Breaking the Surface (Louganis & Marcus, 1996) is an account of the experiences of Greg Louganis, an Olympic gold medal swimmer. Greg was adopted by the Louganis family when he was nine months old. His birth father was Samoan, his mother Northern European, blond and blue-eyed. The adoption agency had difficulty in placing him because of his dark coloring. This complexion brought the taunts of school children who labeled him, "sissy" "nigger," and "retard." They saw his dark skin, heard his stutter, and could not understand his interest in acrobatics. Much later his sexual orientation began to have an impact on his life and lifestyle. HIV/AIDS has become a part of his story as an adult. Ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability converge in the telling of this life history.

The life histories of Katie Cannon, Charles Ogletree, Toni Scheiester, Tony Earls, Cheryl Wills, and Orlando Bragwell may be found in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's work, I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation (1994). The six stories present portraits of middle-class African American men and women, a clergy person, a lawyer, academics, and a filmmaker. The book jacket explains that this is a "very all-American tale; the universal story of people growing up and out of their communities of origin toward some uncharted future."

Historical events such as the Great Depression, World War I and II, the Vietnam War, majority community responses to the Civil Rights Movement or the American Indian Movement (AIM)—all part of our collective history—at the same time they are part of the social time of many individuals and families.

Social time calls attention to the timing of collective life issues in a family group or community (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). Familiar, expected events in life course experiences no longer pertain. We would hope for some assurance of the timing of life events. This surety no longer remains. Children attend preschool and Head Start. Our children do not readily leave home to marry or work; three generations often live in one household with no plans to change the arrangement. Childbearing is postponed as couples, husband and wife, are employed in various occupations. Some will choose not to have children. Still other young people will choose not to marry at all. And, if parents do work, grandparents, traditional caregivers, are employed or busy with their own activities. Adults are found in undergraduate programs, continuing education, or on the way to Elder Hostel events.

Communities may establish their own social time through special events: the Westcott Street Fair, the Kwanzaa Celebration, or the Latino Festival. There are
community myths about Indian Nations that lived on certain plots of land, or there are stories about early civic events.

A consideration of the expansion of gender crossover acknowledges changes in family roles that have been assigned by gender. Families have been able to establish patterns of child care and household management quite different from their childhood family experiences. Careers in law or medicine are possible for women, or they may choose to drive buses or fly airplanes. Male nurses are as competent and nurturing as female nurses.

Social workers need to understand these changes and the effort it will take for many individuals and families to make the necessary adaptations. Some individuals will find success and others will falter (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). Client experiences in historical time, individual time and social time will be influenced by gender, age, position in the family, changing family constellations, and the ethnic reality.

VARIOUS CONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE LIFE CYCLE

The universal movement through life's stages has captured the imagination and attention of many scholars, the most noteworthy being Freud (1916–1917), whose interest was in psychosexual development; Erikson (1950), who explored psycho-social development; Piaget (1965), who examined cognitive development; and Kohlberg (1979), whose interest was in moral development.

Although their emphases varied, all sought to identify those aspects of the life cycle that represent crucial points of change, the kind of life experiences during each stage that promote health and well-being, and the social or psychological factors that impede growth and learning. All touch on the part played by family and society. Most have pointed out that a comfortable progression from one stage to the next takes place when the psychological, physiological, and social tasks or events associated with the preceding stage have been completed in a satisfactory manner. Unlike the more inclusive life course perspective, scant attention has been paid to the experiences of women, the impact of ethnicity or social class, or the historical context.

Logan (1981) accepted the theoretical notion of ego development in all human beings through their life experiences. She also called attention to “the lack of systematic recognition of the effect of race on life experience and its impact on personality development” (p. 47). Her significant contribution is a developmental framework for African American children and youth, and she called for social workers to be aware of the “overwhelming tendency on the part of scholars to minimize the importance of ethnicity and socioeconomic factors in the study of any minority group, especially Black Americans” (p. 51).

The work of Gilligan (1982) presented a major criticism to Kohlberg’s (1979) theory of moral development, which was based on work with male subjects. She presented a female perspective on the development of morality, with emphasis on feeling and concern for others that is significantly different from Kohlberg’s male moral-judgment view.
Norton (1983) challenged strict adherence to Piaget’s (1965) theory of cognitive development, particularly in relation to concepts of “irreversibility” and African American children. Her work suggested that these poor urban children may well be at risk in school systems that do not recognize the validity of the language they bring to the educational experience. Their language models have been as effective as the models of white suburban children. However, the “internal consistency” of the language is different from standard English—the language of the classroom—and less valuable. To recognize the cultural difference is to open the boundaries set by Piaget’s cognitive theory.

Anthropologists have called attention to the diverse rituals and meanings associated with movement from one stage to the next. The extent to which these derive from ingrained beliefs concerning the nature of the universe and person-to-person and person-to-God relationships has often been noted (Van Gennep, 1960).

The characterizations presented here begin with a recognition that as individuals move through the life course aspects of their lives, their experience will be determined by physical growth and change related to chronological age, ethnic group membership, and gender.

Much activity is guided by and responsive to the physical changes accompanying childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. For example, it is not possible for children to engage in activities beyond the range of those congruent with their physical and cognitive development. It is because of their physically based helplessness that children everywhere require protection. They are unable to obtain their own food and such protective shelter and clothing as the elements require. Similarly, menarche and menopause set the boundaries for the childbearing period, and aging inevitably signals some decline in physical faculties. Within these broad limits there is, of course, enormous variability.

In our American society, adulthood is a complex stage lasting for several years. The long-idealized nuclear family, the glorification of youth, and the high value placed on autonomy all serve to give a different stamp to the varying periods of adulthood. The early period of childbearing and rearing may be one of excitement and challenge. As children become adolescents and adults, there are shifting role expectations. Activity once cherished—such as protecting and nurturing—may be seen as interference. For these and other reasons, we divide adulthood into several periods. The first of these is emerging adulthood, a time for mate selection and perhaps marriage, as well as for decisions concerning occupation, which will ultimately determine one’s social class. This is followed by adulthood, the middle stage, which requires skills in relationships with mates, skills in the nurturing of children to provide them with a sense of ethnic pride and identity, and, most particularly, skills in developing and maintaining a standard of living satisfactory to oneself and one’s family. At the final stage, later adulthood, one is confronted by the physiological changes that signal aging. Children once requiring nurture begin to claim their freedom. Aging parents require more commitment, and, upon their death, there is the struggle to grapple with the loss.

Erikson, Freud, and others postulated that each stage of life involves the mastery of a series of psychosexual, psychological, and social tasks. According to
Erikson, if a sense of trust is not developed in infancy, the ability to relate positively to peers, teachers, and others is impaired. The child denied autonomy may in later years lack the sense of adventure that adds much to the fullness of adulthood.

Our perspective incorporates race, ethnicity, and gender as aspects of life course development suggested by Germain (1990, 1994). At the same time, we consider the tasks suggested by life cycle theorists, placing emphasis on how they may be interpreted and defined by various ethnic groups. Focusing on transitional points of the life course as they are bounded by physical growth and change, we identify universal positions in the life course and the accompanying tasks:

I. Entry
   Tasks: Surviving
          Establishing trust

II. Childhood
    Tasks: Developing physical skills
            Acquiring language
            Acquiring cognitive skills
            Acquiring moral judgment
            Acquiring awareness of self
            Acquiring awareness of sex-role arrangement
            Moving out of home into peer group, into school

III. Adolescence
     Tasks: Coping with physical aspects of puberty
            Coping with psychological aspects of puberty
            Coping with sexual awareness/feelings
            Developing relationships with peers of both sexes
            Seeking to achieve increasing independence
            Developing skills required for independent living

IV. Emerging adulthood
    Tasks: Deciding about relationships, getting married
           Deciding on an occupation or career
           Developing sexual behavior
           Developing standards of moral-ethical behavior
           Locating and identifying with a congenial social group
           Developing competence in the political-economic area

V. Adulthood
   Tasks: Relating to peers of the same sex
          Relating to peers of the opposite sex
          Relating to a spouse or companion
          Establishing an occupation or career
          Establishing a home
Bearing and nurturing children
Developing and maintaining a standard of living
Transmitting a sense of peoplehood and the ethnic reality

VI. Later adulthood
Tasks: Adapting to physiological changes
Adapting to the emancipation of children
Maintaining relationships with aging parents
Coping with loss of aging parents

VII. Old age
Tasks: Combating failing health
Coping with diminishing work role
Viewing past with satisfaction
Passing on wisdom—the ethnic reality

Different people's perceptions and how they move within these stages is subject to enormous variability. Whether children are viewed as small replicas of adults or as emerging human beings, are coddled and pampered or treated matter-of-factly, is often a matter of cultural and class perception. The view of adolescence as the period of preparation for the tasks of adulthood as opposed to one that sees this period as the beginning of adulthood is a matter of historical and group perspective.

The discussion that follows considers movement through the life course in greater detail, placing particular emphasis on the ethnic reality.

ENTRY

Birth is the initial trauma in the life course. It is the culmination of a process that has been ongoing for about nine months. As male sperm joins with female egg, a child is conceived. The news of pregnancy may be met with alarm, joy, surprise, or fear, anger, or distress. Family and other caretakers must recognize the impact prenatal influences will have on childhood and beyond.

As the fetus develops, preparing for entry, its growth is linked directly to the physical, social, and psychological health and well-being of the adults in the environment. Social class affects the ability of parents or others to provide for the mother's health and nutrition. The impact of illegal drug usage and smoking is significant despite social class. Addicted mothers bear addicted children, mothers who abuse alcohol and smoke excessively discover that these behaviors may be precursors to fetal alcohol syndrome. Mothers infected with the HIV virus that causes AIDS may infect their newborn.

Of particular interest here is that increasingly HIV/AIDS mothers are members of oppressed ethnic groups, notably African American and Hispanic women. Despite the risks listed here the neonate will breathe normally and cry as they complete the birth process.
Having accomplished birth, the infant must rely on those in its surroundings to supply the basic survival needs, which are experienced as the discomforts of thirst and hunger. These discomforts are vague, diffuse, and relieved by others. The process of becoming “hooked on being human” (Prof. Bredemeier, lecture, Rutgers University, 1964) has begun, for the centrality of other beings is conveyed by the fact that relief from discomfort comes only through them. At the same time, the manner in which infants are touched, fondled, and fed says much to them about the emotions of adults: is the infant wanted or merely tolerated? Was the arrival a joy, a disaster, or an event to be neither celebrated nor neglected?

The successful experiencing of trust will depend on the manner in which early needs are met by individuals and the group into which the child has been cast. If adults have insufficient food and lack the emotional support needed to cope with the dependent new being, comfort and warmth may be difficult to obtain.

Social class position determines the ability of a parent to supply the concrete needs for nurturance. A prosperous Polish merchant whose shop provides specialty food items in an affluent suburb has ample ability to provide for his infant son. His income is more than sufficient to enable the child to develop in the environment by virtue of the abundance of goods available through his father’s middle-class status. The Polish clerk who checks out and bags the groceries in a large supermarket chain is faceless to the many hurried shoppers. His job provides a meager income that must be stretched to provide his infant son with the bare necessities. Yet each child has the potential of receiving nurture that comes from the soothing sounds of caretakers, the stroking of skin, or the embrace that dispels discomfort (Winch, 1971).

When the media blare news of the abandonment or killing of a newborn, the inability of the involved individuals to nurture, to welcome, and to guide is highlighted. The fact that such events are newsworthy points to the fact that most groups and individuals celebrate new life and expect new parents to preserve it.

At the celebration of baptism, the Chicano child becomes a member of the church. At the same time, compadres of the parents present themselves as caretakers, assuming responsibility with the parents for continuity in the faith as well as in the group. The giving of gifts celebrates entry, and rituals symbolize its importance. Hispanic and European female infants are “marked” by the ceremony of ear piercing. This act identifies them as female, one of the group, and in need of protection. The “marking” of a Jewish male infant through circumcision is a sign of union, a permanent mark that incorporates him into the social group. At the time of celebration, parents are informed of the community expectations for their son. The parents in turn publicly reaffirm their commitment to meet these expectations. There are the themes of joy and pride on the birth of the child (Eilberg, 1984). The gifts given on each of these occasions follow ethnic tradition. They spell acceptance and ethnic continuity.

The preparation for birth and manner of entry into the group derives in large measure from the ethnic reality. The manner of birth relates to a group’s beliefs about the nature of the social order, their economic security, and the esteem in which they hold their children. Early on, then, the child’s life course—the sources
of strength, weakness, and struggle—are evident in the nature of the preparation for and management of the event of birth.

The activities of women during pregnancy are often designed to protect the child from real or perceived danger while in the womb, in the belief that adverse behavior may mark the fetus in some way. In some instances these beliefs and the surrounding rituals are powerful, serve a psychologically reassuring function, and in no way put mother or unborn child at risk. For example, some African American women avoid eating strawberries while pregnant, fearing that the child may be born with a strawberry-shaped birthmark on the abdomen. Other women are careful about certain aspects of posture, believing that if they fold their arms around their abdomen or cross their legs they may cause the umbilical cord to wrap around the baby’s neck and cause it to choke.

Other ingrained beliefs and fears may lead to actions that put mother and baby at risk. There are Navajo women who believe that both mother and child are vulnerable to the influences of witchcraft and who therefore keep the news of the pregnancy even from the husband until it is observable (Brownlee, 1978). Wariness of witchcraft may keep the mother from seeking prenatal care, thus risking preventable problems. The African American woman who rubs her stomach with dirty dishwater to ensure an easy delivery or others who insert cobwebs and soot mixed with sugar into the vaginal tract to prevent hemorrhage are placing themselves and their unborn children at risk.

There are genetic factors linked to ethnic group membership over which parents have little control. Tay-Sachs disease and sickle-cell anemia plague some Jewish and African American families. Although found most often in African American families, sickle-cell disease also occurs in other groups, including southern Italians and Sicilians, northern Greeks, and central and southern Asian Indians. The disease is a severe blood disorder in which red blood cells become abnormal in shape, or “sickled,” and cannot carry oxygen normally. The disease is usually debilitating and often fatal in early childhood (Schild & Black, 1984).

The Jewish infant affected with Tay-Sachs disease appears normal at birth. At about 6 months of age there begins a progressive mental and physical decline that leads to death in early childhood. Carriers of both diseases, the parents, are usually healthy, showing no signs of the disease, yet their children are at risk due to their ethnic heritage.

For children the major task at entry is to learn to survive in an alien world. The trust that comes from warmth and comfort may be difficult to attain for those who are in oppressed ethnic groups at lower income levels. Social class and ethnicity in these instances deny parents access to the various resources that would guarantee the child a joyful entry.

**CHILDHOOD**

At forty-two Joseph Bruchac (1993) recalls his childhood. Although he was raised by a beloved Abenaki grandfather, he can claim Slavic and French ancestry as well.
He could claim other names that identified him more clearly as an Aberiaki, he could be known as “Quiet Bear” or Gah-neh-go-he-yo, which means “the Good Mind.” Raised by older relatives, he was different; in school he wrote poetry and talked about animals as though they were people. Although his grandfather jokingly called him “mongrel,” others who made the remark were not joking.

The fourth-grade children whose school experiences are recorded by Greene and Ryan (1967) live in Harlem and East Harlem, New York City. Ricardo, Jesus, Marshall, and Pablo are among the students in Room 33B. As the teacher arrives they are playing handball with Richardo’s book. There is yelling and screaming. When there is some calm, the day begins with the salute to the flag, and a review of the days of the week and the months of the year. When the attendance roll is taken, it can be noted that attendance is not perfect, but this is ordinary. Notes from home reveal the quality of life for these children. “You quit make my kid cry, sign, M. Peraro.” Other notes give more information about life. “Pedro was out with asthma. The heat was off for three days, we had to go to my sister’s house” (p. 11). By the time these African American and Puerto Rican children are five, they have developed a withdrawal smile: eyes down, lips pouting, cheek turned or nestled against the shoulder. Sometimes it is fear or shyness, for the most part it has been learned from older children.

These experiences of childhood are unlike the idealized world of television’s Beaver Cleaver or even Bart Simpson. The struggle with the burden of membership in oppressed ethnic groups is debilitating at this early age. As this chapter continues, attention will be paid to other experiences in childhood as children attempt to accomplish the tasks assigned to them within the context of family. These tasks serve to socialize the children as they become members of the family, the group, the neighborhood, and the larger society. Parents, primarily mothers, are assigned the role of culture bearers and respond to this assignment in various ways that will influence development at this early stage of the life course.

The Vagaries of Childhood

Gender
Children have much to accomplish during this period of development. Sex-specific experiences and assignments begin early. The clarity and experiences vary among ethnic groups. Many Orthodox Jewish girls learn early that they have a particular position in the religious community. Pogrebin (1991) recalls a sign in a New York City community advertising a Talmud course: TALMUD FOR EVERYONE—MEN ONLY. This stands as a reminder of childhood experiences during which she wondered about women being excluded from certain rituals. Under Jewish law, children are obligated to say Kaddish for deceased parents. Sons are obligated, and daughters are not prohibited, but they have been effectively prohibited. The position of women in this religious community is learned during childhood.

Discipline
An integral part of the socialization of children is to prepare them to act in responsible ways in the family, at school, and in the community. If the established rules
are violated, then discipline is necessary. A study of the discipline styles of African American families adds to our understanding of the experience of childhood for these children. Denby and Alford (1996) discovered that through discipline, sometimes including spanking, parents wished to teach their children responsibility and accountability, to be able to distinguish between right and wrong, and to curb inappropriate behavior before it escalated. They also wished to help their children to learn to be respectful, to abide by rules, and to recognize the consequences when rules are broken.

Other messages were related to the matter of race and racism, a reality that cannot be avoided. They wanted their children to understand that as African American children they must work extra hard because discrimination remains prevalent. Parents recognized the need for children to be armed with survival techniques as they related to race (Denby & Alford, 1996).

**Parents: Mothers and Fathers**

The Italian American woman holds an exalted position as mother, and within this role she is to devote herself exclusively to the children. The roles of nurturer and caretaker are ethnic group expectations; it is from this activity that she receives her satisfaction. This devotion and commitment presents rewards of life-long loyalty and devotion. However, this ethnic directive for an exclusive maternal relationship, begun during childhood, presents a barrier at the time of separation.

The elevation of Italian American mothers gives reason to consider the father’s relationship with his children and the influence he may have on their development. Johnson (1985) contends that while the mother’s role seemed to have a timeless quality, major changes evolve that involve the role of fathers and the dilution of his authority. While he may exercise final judgment in family matters, a father is less likely to instill the fear described in early accounts of Italian families. Children may expect that their fathers will be provider and protector and to have a greater role in child bearing and other activities in the family. This is unlike the experience of his father or grandfather. A father in Johnson’s study presented his philosophy on childrearing, “I tell my children, don’t think of ’I’ or ‘me,’ think of ‘we’ and ‘us’.”

Andrew Billingsley’s (1993) examination of the enduring legacy of the African American family reveals that by the year 2000 there will be about 3.2 million children. Most of these children will have working mothers. Special effort must be made for adult supervision after school. In the past the extended family, particularly grandmothers, were available, but in the present grandmothers are in the workforce as well.

**Social Class—Poverty**

Our presentation of the vagaries of childhood must include those children who by virtue of social class may be found in poverty. They do not have the ability to even approach many of the tasks of childhood enumerated earlier. DuBray (1992) maintains that the homelessness of American Indian adults may be related to early childhood placement in non-Indian homes. These placement decisions have contributed to feelings of alienation, identity problems, mental breakdowns, and alcoholism.

Social service staff members at Cardinal McCloskey Services in New York City explain that the “War on the Poor” has a significant impact on the lives of children
and their families (Moore, Watkins, Greaux, & McMurray, 1997). The consequences of this institutional behavior are highlighted by the following vignettes:

A Nicaraguan family includes an alcoholic father, a recovering mother, a 40 pound, 10 year old with an eating disorder and an unsupervised five year old. The father collects discarded things on the street to sell. The two bedroom apartment is filthy.

An 18 year old mother of four. The children were placed after the four year old gashed his stomach with a broken TV picture tube which required 10 stitches. The other three children had marks all over their bodies.

The children who receive services at the Cardinal McCloskey Services suffer from sexual abuse and domestic violence often related to the abuse of drugs and/or alcohol. Parents present themselves as angry, hostile, fearful, and hopeless. These childhood experiences transcend ethnicity; social class is the ethnic reality component that is operational in their lives, not the idealized view of childhood that may be found in textbooks or on television and movie screens.

These poor children, like all children, have much to do and much to learn. Their socialization is a process that occurs within the vagaries of their lives. The positive and negative events experienced in childhood, the skills learned, and the attitudes internalized will be modified as they move through the life course. Children who have been loved, taught, and given a chance to test life without being subjected to family or structurally induced trauma are more likely to be successful and well-integrated human beings, ready for transition to a crucial and perhaps intrinsically dramatic stage—adolescence.

**ADOLESCENCE**

The move to adolescence or puberty is both physiologically and socially determined. Although it cannot readily be said that childhood has ended, there are events that are indicative of impending manhood and womanhood. The onset of menstrual flow, development of pubic hair, and breast growth in girls are in large measure public and visible, as are the growth of facial hair and the voice change in boys.

The ethnic response to these psychological and anatomical facts is diverse. In some families and communities these events mark the assumption of the rights and obligations of adulthood. In others, they appear to be treated as unwelcome events for they portend the emergence of physiological sexual capacity and sexual arousal in a social milieu never quite prepared to deal with these realities. Whatever the case, adolescence is a time of continued growth and preparation for the responsibilities of adult life. Social puberty is a concern in our consideration of the ethnic reality, for children move from asexual childhood into a more sexual world in which girls and boys become young women and men.

As the Puerto Rican female child learns the female role by imitating her mother, she receives much affirmation from the entire family. Gradually she takes on more female responsibility in caring for young siblings—the babies—but there
is no talk of sex. She gains knowledge from friends with a similarly meager experience and from overheard conversations of adults.

This practice is not limited to the Puerto Rican experience. Talk of sex is taboo among Irish and Italian people as well (Biddle, 1976; Krause, 1978a). Daughters know little of sexual functioning. The limited information that is given is at best mysterious. The education of children in matters related to sex and sexuality is an issue that transcends the ethnic reality and in many communities becomes a source of much tension.

Adolescent women who are mothers must care for their own babies. Many African American teenage women have engaged in sexual behavior that places them at risk: early sexual behavior often with multiple partners without the effective use of birth control; drug abuse; and lack of information on birth control and devices (Ladner & Gourdine, 1992). The tasks of adulthood needed for childbearing and nurturing must be accomplished before the necessary skills have been acquired. More appropriate tasks require coping with physical and psychological aspects of puberty along with developing sexual awareness and developing relationships with peers of both sexes.

Adolescent members of other oppressed ethnic groups have concerns unique to their ethnic reality. Korean adolescents, children of immigrant parents, report that their parents attempt to impose traditional values emphasizing conformity and docility. They sense that their parents do not wish them to express opinions that differ from their own and that they may be critical of behaviors including dating and grooming. In their struggle to adapt to Western ways, adolescents question the Korean values of patriarchy and filial piety as they conflict with values of individualism and self-assertion. Thus, a generation gap begins to develop (Rhee, 1996).

Prothrow-Stith (1991) has defined adolescence as “The Dangerous Passage,” a long tunnel connecting two positions in the life course. A child enters the tunnel, an adult emerges at the other end. The processes of adolescence occur inside the tunnel. Four tasks must be accomplished to be healthy, functioning adults as they exit. Each child will have his or her own special trip during which these tasks may be accomplished: (1) separating from the family, (2) forging a healthy sexual identity, (3) preparing for the future, and (4) forging a moral value system.

The ethnic reality influences the manner in which each task is accomplished. There is evidence that separation may be extremely difficult because their parents do not expect that adolescents would want to leave the warmth and protection of the family and the mother (Messina, 1994). As noted earlier, Korean adolescents struggle with the traditional values of their parents and the values they encounter in the larger society. Their parents believe that it is their responsibility and right to make decisions related to the present as well as the future (Rhee, 1996).

No matter what the adolescence experience may be, Prothrow-Stith (1991) reminds us that adolescence is a normal phase of life, not a pathology.

**EMERGING ADULTHOOD**

Adolescence sets the stage for young adulthood, a time in the life course during which individuals are expected to direct energies toward the larger society. The
potential for intimacy, emotional commitment, and giving to others increases. Decisions need to be made. Questions are posed; some are answered, others are not. Marriage? Career? Education? Each requires an answer. We have indicated that tasks for these young people include deciding about relationships in a congenial social group and sexual behavior within the context of moral-ethical behavior. The ethnic reality’s influence in this decision-making process will be tested as children approach young adulthood.

Young African Americans move into this life course position much like their peers in other ethnic groups, full of promise. Those who are prepared will search for success in community colleges, four-year colleges or universities, schools or programs that are preparation for certain technical careers, or interesting entry-level jobs (Billingsley, 1992).

However, many emerging adults have difficulty making the transition from adolescence. Although the majority of young African American males (75 percent) are not in the criminal justice system, the remainder find themselves in the system serving long jail terms, among the underemployed, or unemployed. Discovering that they cannot maintain themselves, they return to live with their parents. Unmarried mothers seek protection in the homes of mothers and grandmothers (Billingsley, 1992).

The Search for a Mate

Although freedom to select one’s own marriage partner is the U.S. ideal, parents continue to influence the decision. They select homes in particular neighborhoods and provide recreational activities that will ensure association with children in families who are “like us.” The validity of these residential choices will become evident as young adults begin to locate compatible companions with similar ethnic traditions and experiences. Within this social group one may find a special person who will become a life-long partner.

Clearly the family hope is for a marriage that will provide continuity in traditions and rituals. Although young Korean-Americans are more tolerant of out-group marriage than their parents, they still feel that other Koreans are preferable as spouses (Pyong Gap Min, 1988). Greek families who have been in the United States for at least three generations have relinquished the earlier emphasis on ethnoreligious concerns, and social class considerations become important. Still, those young people who maintain their ethnic identification tend to date and marry within their own ethclass (Kourvetaris, 1988).

Bodine (1972) has observed that within the Pueblo nation the Taos and Santo Domingo have made overt attempts to control the marriages with outsiders and residents on the reservation. The degree of “Indianness” is not to be questioned; rather, the concern is for the examination of strict endogamy in the search for clues to the acculturation of a pueblo and the success of attempts to resist outside pressures.

African American families hold marriage as an ancient tradition. It is valued because it offers expressive and instrumental benefits. Young men and women desire to be married because these benefits are believed to improve their overall life satisfaction (Blackman, 1995).
There is increasing evidence that emerging adults who have been able to come in contact with other ethnic groups at school, at work, or in social situations are likely not to marry people who are “like us.” A majority of African American women college students reveal that they do not feel pressure from family or friends in relation to the ethnicity of men they date or marry. Only 20 percent of the women in this particular study indicate that they sense pressure to marry within their own group (Porter & Bronzwa, 1995).

The increase in mixed marriages is examined in the popular culture in various ways. James McBride (1997) in the search for his mother’s story discovered her Orthodox Jewish heritage. With this she married two African American men and bore twelve children who identify themselves as African American.

In *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons,* Jane Lazarre (1996) tells the story of her marriage to Douglas White, an African American man. Both were young adults when they met during a strike of public assistance workers against the New York City Welfare Department. Through this protest, both began to develop skills and competence in the political-economic area, a significant task for the emerging adult.

**Emerging Men and Woman**

Ethnic dispositions relating to the role of woman as caretaker are questioned as women reevaluate that role. This reevaluation, however, may place them at risk of diluting and losing many of the characteristics that made them “female” and initially attractive to their ethnic male counterparts. Murillo (1978) cited the example of a Chicano male graduate student greatly concerned about his decision to marry a young Chicana woman. He wished her to maintain the old ways, which required her to be devoted to her husband and children, serve their needs, support her husband’s actions and decisions, and take care of the home. She opposed this and conflict arose. As emerging adults, both were in the process of preparing for a career, but for the woman, a Chicana, this is a relatively new adventure, the more familiar career being that of wife and mother.

For young Jewish women there is less of a problem. The plan to work continues a tradition established long ago by grandmothers and mothers whose diverse occupations were important to the survival of the family. Jewish tradition more easily accepts employment of women. In the present, however, the emerging Jewish woman has choice. The Jewish value of education is traditional but in the past was more reserved for men. Women now attend college in equal numbers with men but may experience conflict as they make the choice. “As a young Jewish woman I am achievement oriented, committed to individual achievement, accomplishment and career—but, I am equally committed to marriage. What then of my children? If I am to be a responsible mother then I must remain at home with my young children” (Krause, 1978a). Such is the ethnic dilemma shared by Italians and Slavic young women.

A young married Navajo woman expects to hold to the traditions of the past. Her husband is the formal head of the household, but she has as much, or perhaps even more, influence in the family management due to a reverence for matrilineal
descent. This tradition provides her with support from the extended family, with her brothers assuming responsibility in the teaching and discipline of their nieces and nephews. Women and men, sisters and brothers participate in the retention of the ethnic reality (DuBray, 1992).

We are reminded continually that young African American males find themselves continually at risk in relation to their peers in other ethnic groups (Gibbs, 1988; Billingsley, 1993; Davis & Beverly, 1991). Gibbs has characterized them as "endangered, embittered, and embattled." Billingsley speaks of murder and young African American men who are the victims, while Prothrow-Stith and Spivak (1992) look for solutions through a community-based prevention project.

Indeed there is statistical evidence and rationales for these experiences. Too often they are revealed on the six and eleven o'clock news. Seldom is there news of the humiliation felt when young men are stopped by the police for being in the "wrong" neighborhood, at the "wrong" time of day or night; when waiters in upscale restaurants give minimal service; and when sales clerks still question the validity of credit cards. Billingsley's (1993) explorations have discovered that young African American men have more positive feelings about themselves than do African American women and feel good about themselves more often as well.

This sense of well-being has led many men and women into the managerial ranks of major American cooperations. Davis and Watson (1985) have described the experience as, "swimming in the mainstream." The exercise is not a particularly refreshing one; rather there had been, and continues to be, an atmosphere in which race, an important variable in the experience, is not addressed. Within this tenuous environment these emerging adults have learned to make accommodations to the work in the same manner as their white colleagues. The position requires a commitment and necessitates adapting one's personal behavioral style to fit the demands of the system. It is important that the media and societal view of African American young men expands to incorporate the stories of this cohort of young adults. African American men are so much more than persons in trouble with the law, entertainers, sports figures, or politicians.

Competence is essential if young men and women are to enter the political arena. Although Wilma Mankiller was forty years old when she became the first woman principal chief of the Cherokees, the election was a culmination of political activism that had begun earlier when her family was moved from Adair County, Oklahoma, to San Francisco, California, as part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) relocation program (Mankiller & Wallis, 1994). Mary Crow Dog (1990), a Lakota woman, became involved in a political movement that changed her personal life as she and other American Indians challenged the federal policy relating to Indian nations. The American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the offices of the Washington, DC, offices of the BIA. *Lakota Woman* is Crow Dog's story of coming of age politically. Competence was essential if Mankiller and Crow Dog, along with other American Indians, were to make a significant change in federal policy as it intruded on the lives of Native people.

All young adults do not become as committed to social change as did these young women; others remain at the margins looking on. The successful young
men and women will be able to move confidently into adulthood ready for the tasks of 
generativity.

ADULTHOOD

Generativity, an aspect of adulthood suggested by Erikson, is primarily concerned 
with establishing and guiding the next generation; it is a time of productivity and 
creativity (Erikson, 1950). Generativity is the longest stage in the life cycle, during 
which individuals assume responsibility for the care of others, primarily through 
the role of parent, but also in varying career, job, and political experiences.

Children move from entry to adolescence and emerge into adulthood under 
the supervision of adults. Imparting a sense of ethnicity is a task that is accom-
plished, for the most part, unconsciously. But in this process children receive a 
sense of belonging to a special group that has special food, a language of its own, 
exciting holidays, and celebrations with family and friends; usually there is devo-
tion to a particular religion. For Napierkowski (1976), recollections of an ethnic 
childhood include a father aware of discrimination against Polish Americans who 
remained proud of their Polish American identity and openly contemptuous of the 
"cowardice" of Poles who anglicized their last names. As an adult, Napierkowski 
has the Polish heritage transmitted by his father. He feels a conscious need to help 
his children to grow up to be Polish Americans. This means that he is their protec-
tor when their names are garbled, when they are called "Polack," or when they are 
victims of an insensitive Polish joke, an experience that brings a tightness to his 
chest. To be the bearer of ethnicity is not always a pleasant task. The Polish experi-
ence is paralleled by that of Italians, who recoil from the term "dago" or "wop"; 
Puerto Ricans from "spick"; Asians from "chink" or "jap"; and African Americans 
from the viciousness of "nigger." As one assumes the role of adult protector and 
feels increasing pride in this achievement, one realizes that the ethnic heritage held 
so dearly may be viewed by others as a joke.

Other adult Polish Americans speak of a childhood in which aspects of Polish 
heritage were set aside in order to become American; for example, the Polish lan-
guage was not spoken and English was used daily. To speak Polish would call 
attention to the fact of Polish descent, which might serve as a barrier to upward 
imobility (Wrobel, 1973). The purpose of this conscious denial of ethnicity is to pro-
tect children from the experiences of discrimination. Adults, each in his or her own 
way, function as protectors of the young from the hidden injuries of ethnicity.

Color, the banner of ethnicity for African Americans, identifies them imme-
diately. Parents become the bearers of ethnicity. Hair that is so often described as 
"kinky" and "bad" can become a crown of pride and glory. The joy of black hair is 
in this description: like a bunched-up cloud or dense-packed candy floss with the 
smell of milky coconut easing through the delicate braids (Roy, 1992). Parental fail-
ure to affirm is described in Toni Morrison's novel, The Bluest Eye (1972). Pecola 
wishes for "blue eyes, prettier than the sky, prettier than Alice and Jerry storybook 
eyes." Such a wish cannot be fulfilled. Unprotected by her parents, she becomes
unable to cope with life. Most African American parents understand and do protect their young, knowing that they will not acquire blue eyes. But they know that with blue eyes their children would not suffer from the effects of racism that calls their skin color and hair texture into question.

In addition to protection, there are the tasks of nurture of the young through the provision of basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. These are provided through the income received from activity in the workplace. The job or jobs and the level of income they produce will determine the social class of the family.

Middle-aged, middle-class African Americans have spent time in adolescence and emerging adulthood investing in an education that has moved them to this level. Both men and women have made this investment despite institutional racism. As adults they marry and together gain a social status that gives them the ability to provide their children with opportunities they missed in childhood. These may include music lessons, recreational activities, and perhaps private schools.

The vigor with which these parents have taken on the tasks of generativity has presented them with a dilemma. They have discovered that with integrated neighborhoods and schools, they must strive hard to guide their children into a strong ethnic awareness. While they provide the better life, they must help their children to "establish a Black identity and pride while they are learning white mainstream cultural values" (Morgan, 1985, p. 32).

Work for many adults is an absorbing experience. Middle-class African Americans manifest the Puritan orientation toward work and success; this striving leaves many with little time for recreation and other community experiences. The regard for work is shared by Slavic Americans, who live to work and who believe that if one cannot work, one is useless. "Work is the capacity for good, not to work lets in bad. Work is God's work, laziness is the devil's work" (Stein, 1976, p. 123). Slavic Americans have labored at almost any employment to be found, but primarily in blue-collar occupations. When both husband and wife work, this joint effort yields a comfortable existence. Efforts to move into the professional ranks may be viewed as more problematical.

It is important to note that ethnicity may discourage certain types of employment. Although employment is not ruled out, the Italian American woman rarely works as a domestic. Such employment in the home of others is seen as a usurpation of her loyalty to the family. Thus, such employment has been left to Irish, German, African American, Hispanic, English, Scandinavian, and French women (Gambino, 1974). The primary responsibility for Italian women is to maintain a home, nurture the children, keep a home that is immaculately clean (a symbol of a sound family), and be attuned to the needs of her husband. Italian women married to Italian men in the present are less likely to work than are women in other ethnic groups. The differences, however, are not significant, suggesting a change in adult role assignments. Socioeconomic status and the ethnic reality will influence the decision to enter the work force, with working-class women more likely to work when their children are older (Johnson, 1985).

The consequence of failure to respond wholeheartedly to the role of nurturer can be seen in the story of one of our Italian undergraduate students. An excep-
tional student in her thirties, she was proud of her Italian heritage and during her senior year was deeply involved in preparations for her teenage daughter’s wedding. However, one year after graduation she appeared at a college function fifteen pounds lighter, with a new hairstyle and a special radiance. In that year she had found employment and separated from her husband. She explained that part of her difficulty had been the energy that it took for her to be the good Italian wife and mother. She added the role of student quite successfully but lost favor in the community. Her children, like many others, disapprove of her new lifestyle and her rejection of their father. But it is her feeling that part of their discomfort is due to her rejection of the Italian way of life that she, as bearer of the ethnicity, had taught them. As culture-bearer she played the woman’s role of nurturer, supportive wife, and mother. The comments of family and others implied that she was expected to continue to assume the assigned domestic responsibilities rather than enter higher education, a pursuit left to men. Status was lost when she shifted her interest, resisting the responsibility that is the focus of Italian American life, the family. Her conclusions show considerable insight into aspects of ethnic disposition and move her well along into an understanding of herself (Sirely & Valerio, 1982).

This Italian woman chose to be a single parent, a position of risk. But for many African American women the choice has not been a conscious one. Many assume this head-of-family status by virtue of being widowed or separated from their husband involuntarily, often by the husband’s incarceration. Emasculation of the African American male by institutional racism has made him less available instrumentally and expressively to his family. The low-income African American woman, unlike the middle-class woman described earlier, is aware that the woman may become the primary support for her children. This is a role she does not cherish, but she wishes for a more viable family unit (Painter, 1977). Generativity, caring for the next generation, is acted out alone, but not without difficulty. Greater energy is needed to accomplish the universal tasks.

Admittedly, many adults are not sufficiently prepared for marriage and parenthood. Individuals take on these roles without adequate credentials. Subtle messages with clues as to the best behavior have been given but are not always appreciated or even understood.

*Machismo*, in American popular culture, has become a term most often associated with a rugged, aggressive male. Although derived from the Spanish word *macho* meaning male animal or iron tools related to husbandry, it has come to depict rugged, aggressive male behavior, particularly of Latino males. Mayo (1997) offers a view of machismo that has been overlooked as we examine the ethnic reality. We seldom affirm the nurturing, caring, and protective roles of fathers, thereby limiting our appreciation for the ability of these adults to be successful in the adult task of nurturing children.

In a similar light, African American males are continually assumed to be unreliable, shift, lazy, and criminal. The popular culture, particularly television, has begun to present alternative views of the African American male and his position in the family. Bill Cosby has been a professional father, a physician. Now a more mature Cosby presents himself in retirement. In each family situation comedy he
is a respected husband and father; first a physician, then a working class retiree. In neither instance may he be called or thought of as “boy,” a racist description of an African American male no matter what his age may be.

Jewish men, like Hispanic men, are expected to protect their women. Adults are expected to marry. Marriage is *mitzvah* (duty); besides procreation it provides companionship and fulfillment. The biblical directives “Be fruitful and multiply” and “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helpmate” legitimize the expectation, but the vow of the groom makes public his intention: “Be my wife in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel. I will work for you, I will honor you, support and maintain you as it becomes Jewish husbands who work for their wives, honoring and supporting them faithfully” (Birnbaum, 1975).

The traditional marriage contract is seen by some as an act of acquisition by the man. The woman’s role is a passive and dependent one. The ceremony contains unilateral action on the part of the groom, with the bride’s role limited to her silently indicating her consent. In order to circumvent such inequities, many couples write their own contracts, which eliminate some of the problems for women under Jewish marriage law (Schneider, 1984).

Biblical directive again provides clues for appropriate behavior for the Jewish housewife. On each Sabbath eve, the religious Jewish man is expected to remind his wife of these expectations: “She is trusted by her husband, obeyed by her servants, admired by the community, kind to the poor and needy; she cares well for her household and is not idle. And in return her children rise up and call her blessed and her husband praises her” (Proverbs 31:10–31). This passage also gives affirmation to the Jewish tradition of work for adult women; indeed, the work allows for creativity, a characteristic of this adult phase. The directive includes selecting a field and planting a vineyard, making linen garments and selling them to a merchant, taking produce to the market for sale, and making her own clothes. Schneider (1984) added that nothing is said about doing the laundry, raising the children, or participating in any volunteer organizations except in being kind to the poor.

Jewish women have a varied history in the United States in relation to work. One of their significant contributions of generativity was in the organization of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union after the tragic 1911 Triangle shirtwaist fire, in which many working Jewish women lost their lives.

Each ethnic group benefits if there is a tradition that gives support to behavior that is experienced and observed in the present. The ancient Asian tradition of filial piety provides a framework for parent–child relations in Chinese and Japanese families. The directive is for reciprocal obligations from parent to child and child to parent in day-to-day family interactions as well as in major family decisions (Kitano, 1974).

In Jewish and Asian families, men traditionally hold positions as protectors and heads of household. On many occasions African American men seeking the role of protector are denied the role and their manhood. More often the media and literature present them in relation to the things they cannot do in the position of
husband and father; they say little about what African American men may be really like, alluding only to toughness and ignoring tenderness (Hannerz, 1969).

**Child Rearing**

The intricate day-to-day tasks of child care require much concentration, for the outcome will influence the future. Given the privilege of motherhood, the Slavic American mother’s ethnic behavior may deny her children early autonomy by binding them to her, letting them know that they have no mind of their own, no will of their own, no separate existence apart from her. They are expected to be strong, resist adversity, and fight worry, and they begin to understand the importance of work by picking up after their play (Stein, 1976).

A contrasting practice permits the American Indian child more freedom. An Indian child may have available innumerable family members who assume responsibility for care. Parents do not see themselves as figures of authority but as guides or role models. This style, however, has placed American Indian children in jeopardy, for the mainstream interpretation has been that these children are running wild without the care of their parents. Permissiveness, allowing for individual development, is a different but effective way of discipline accepted by the American Indian community. Unfortunately, the American Indian children are in greater jeopardy for, once removed from their families, their experiences prevent the learning of skills necessary in later stages of development.

The Indian Child Welfare Acts of 1978 and 1980 addressed concerns related to the disproportionately large number of American Indian children who were removed from their families, the frequency with which they were placed in non-Indian settings, and a failure by public agencies to consider legitimate cultural differences when working with Indian families. The act reaffirmed tribal jurisdiction over child welfare matters for children living on the reservation, reestablished tribal authority to accept or reject jurisdiction over children living off the reservation, and specified that public agencies are to give preference to members of the child’s extended family or tribe and other Indian families in making substitute care and adoptive placements (Plantz, Hubbell, Barrett, & Dobrec, 1989). Progress has been made in implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act. Indian children’s rights to their cultural heritage are being protected better than in the past. The role of Indian parents and tribes in protecting those rights has been strengthened.

In many localities public agencies have attempted to comply with the Act. Some states have passed Indian child welfare legislation and negotiated state-tribal agreements and service contracts. Federal efforts have been limited. Permanency planning in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agencies is not practiced as well as it is in tribal social services. Children in BIA care remain longer and are less likely to be discharged to family settings. Tribal-based services have been found to have performed well in following standards of good casework practice and achieving family-based permanency for children in out-of-home care (Plantz, Hubbell, Barrett, & Dobrec, 1989). This attention gives greater assurance of child-rearing
practices that will give a greater sense of ethnic identity, one that will support continued growth and development.

**Friends**

For the adult, peer friendships round out one's existence and provide confidants and associates for recreation. The initial source for these friendships is the extended family, followed by members of the same ethnic group, which often means those with the same religious affiliation.

The hierarchy of friendship for the Italian begins with those who are *sangu du me sangu* (blood of my blood); next there are *compodi* and *comare* (godparents), who are intimate friends. Few Italians limit their friendships to other Italians. Increasing intermarriage makes this difficult. Respondents in Johnson's (1985) examination of Italian American families found the creation of "Little Italies" distasteful. Childhood experiences in insular communities had limited their exposure to other American values. As a result, 60 percent of those interviewed reported a mixed friendship group. This group and other Italians have close friendships with family, neighborhood friends, and friends from childhood, as well as persons who in earlier times were viewed as *stranieri* (strangers) (Gambino, 1974).

*Compadrazo* and *compadres* are terms that identify those Mexican American adults who hold the same status as *compodi* or *comare* to Italian Americans. They are godparents and most cherished friends, reliable in times of stress imposed by various insensitive institutions. In times of joy they are available for the celebration, for they are family. Although the Mexican American man has freedom of movement in the larger society, the woman is expected to remain close to the home, and so her friendship group contains her daughters, even after they have gained maturity, and other female relatives, such as cousins and nieces. There is comfort here and the women often become confidantes (Murillo, 1978). In the Polish experience, friends outside of the immediate family may be found in the neighborhood, but they still are not as close as family (Wrobel, 1973).

As adults attempt to find the friendship of others like them, they form ethnic communities, ethnic islands; sometimes these are labeled ghetto or barrio in the negative sense of the word. These may be communities of rejected people who, despite the barrenness of their existence, find a sense of belonging and cohesion that is characteristic of ethnic communities. It is here that adults attempt to maintain their homes; it is here that they find friends and a church. Howell (1973) and LeMasters (1975) suggest that in such a Polish neighborhood a homeowner may work in a local factory while his wife remains at home to care for the children. On Wednesday evenings he bowls in an all-male league, but on most evenings he stops by the local tavern to drink with the other men. On Tuesday his wife occasionally plays bingo, and on Sunday she goes to church (he goes only on special occasions). Their neighbors are their best friends, but they maintain relatively close relationships with their parents, siblings, and extended family and are wary of outsiders. This pattern is found again and again within the ethnic groups we are concerned with. African Americans have long maintained kinship networks that have provided emotional
as well as financial resources. Stack (1975), in her study of kinship networks, has established their presence for low-income families, whereas Willie (1974) and McAdoo (1979, 1981) have done the same for middle-income families.

Early Italian communities, often called "Little Italies," served as a place of refuge with family and friends. Immigration patterns were such that the bulk of a community may have arrived in the United States together, reestablishing the home community and the friendships that it maintained. In time, friendships extended into the larger society as jobs became available outside the neighborhood and politics drew Italian Americans into the public arena. Mutual benefit societies and Italian language newspapers presented the possibility of developing friendship outside the family and immediate community (Monti, 1994).

Outside the immediate family, the adult task of relating to peers is achieved in the ethnic neighborhood: Chinatown, Little Italy, or American Indian communities in cities or on the reservation. In these spaces families feel at home. The elderly provide the sounds of the language of home; the odors of food associated with ritual and celebration provide comfort. It is here that adults assume the care of two cohorts of the family, the elderly and the young. In this middle ground adults attempt to carry out assigned tasks as they move along their own life course.

**LATER ADULTHOOD**

To recognize that one is in later adulthood is to realize that time is in constant motion, and with this movement there are physiological and emotional changes. The climacteric tells women very clearly that their childbearing years are ended. What then will be the life for women whose ethnic assignment was to bear children and care for them? Time has moved them into adulthood and independence, but in many instances the ethnic dispositions permit and encourage a closeness that can be observed by determining the geographical distance. It is not uncommon to find that Italian, Polish, and African American emancipated children and their families remain in the neighborhood. Those who move, perhaps from the city to the suburbs, are seen as far away (Gans, 1962). The telephone is a resource that provides the possibility, daily or weekly, for communication.

The expectation for care of aging parents manifests itself in various ways. To the middle-aged Italian, responsibility for aging parents is an unwritten law, a tie that cannot be broken. The motives for caring range from duty and repayment to love (Johnson, 1985). The tradition of filial piety in Chinese families directs that children, youth, and adults respect and care for aging parents (Yu, 1984).

The work of Chatters and Taylor (1993) has determined that among African American families adult children are frequent providers of assistance to their parents. These findings are consistent with earlier reports that intergenerational support is a characteristic of African American families. This support of the elderly is critical to their sense of well-being.

The sense of generation and ethnicity both remain strong. Most older Americans expect some measure of regard from the younger generation. The passage of
time, technology, and lifestyle changes have all contributed to the need for older family members to adapt to a world that, although it holds them in regard, does not respond in the old ways.

OLD AGE

Old age is a position in the life course to be held with pride. Individuals have lived through historical and social changes. Length of life may be related to health practices and the availability of quality health care. Jews have higher rates of heart problems than do other ethnic groups. Gelfand (1982) related this to social class, the stress of employment, or high-cholesterol diet. The oldest African Americans (over eighty-five years) are more likely to be poor, have four or more chronic conditions, and very serious health problems (Gibson & Jackson, 1992).

As old age approaches, work performed with ease in earlier years becomes a burden. Limitations are obvious. There are those who, recognizing this, would not accept employment if it were appropriate and available. The lack of work may be humiliating for others. Slavic Americans perceive work as good. When many men reach retirement age, changes in behavior may be noted. Rather than admit to aging, which implies incapacity, inactivity, weakness, and dependency, they may attempt to work even more vigorously. This invariably fails. Retirement follows and with it, for many, comes depression, apathy, despair, and assumed uselessness. Time used in the past at labor is used in wandering aimlessly around the home and neighborhood. Once a respected figure, he now becomes dependent, perpetually in motion; his wife and children respond by becoming bossy (Stein, 1976).

Stein posed the possibility that in some instances long-hidden conflicts surface in regard to the retired male’s loss of authority, power, and respect, even though there is evidence of almost universal respect for and deference to the aging.

Historical time influences the experiences of elderly persons who immigrated to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Among these were single and married Chinese men with a dream of wealth that could be shared when they returned home. A variety of immigration acts, wars, and the fall of China changed the direction of their life courses and they remained in the United States, particularly in Chinese ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatowns. Many older residents of these communities are the single men who arrived in the early 1900s (Kim, 1990).

Kim noted that this first generation continues to live with problems associated with speaking English poorly or not speaking English at all. Many elderly in San Francisco’s Chinatowns are in poor health, evident by physical limitations and visits to doctors and herbalists. Mental and emotional problems are evident as well.

Elderly American Indians rarely seek help from mental health systems in urban or rural reservation communities. Complaints to professionals are related to physical ailments or ailments that are not immediately identified as psychiatric. The result is that psychiatric problems may be the most difficult diagnostic issue for Indian elderly (Neligh & Scully, 1990).
Evidence of integrity may be gleaned from elderly Indian men, who comment, “Our challenge is great to our people, but so is the dedication of man (and woman) to seek good medicine” (p. 184) and “Indian medicine is a guide to health, rather than a treatment. The choice of being well instead of being ill is not taken away from an Indian person” (Garrett, 1990, p. 180). The practice of Indian medicine promotes a way of life that encourages a focus on wellness and internal harmony of the physical, mental, spiritual, and personal with the balance of family and the environment. These practices have sustained many elderly Indian men and women.

Grandparents often assume strong leadership roles in the extended family that may include aunts, uncles, or cousins. Tradition in the Lakota tribes of South Dakota calls for grandparents to rear the eldest grandchild from infancy. Children benefit from this act of integrity; they are usually responsible adults, with great respect for elders in the community (DuBray, 1992).

Kinship ties among all generations would seem to be a resource, particularly if all are in the same household. Because of the reality of institutional racism, elderly African Americans may reside with children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren without emotional support. The arrangement is necessary, but economic difficulties make for a stressful situation.

Religion plays an important part in the lives of many African Americans. Studies of religious involvement based on the National Survey of Black Americans show that in comparison with younger people elderly African Americans have a higher probability of having a religious affiliation, of attending religious services as an adult, and of being a church member. In addition, they read religious materials, watch/listen to religious broadcasts, pray and request prayer from others. Accumulating evidence suggests that religion is important in maintaining positive mental health by reducing stress and enhancing self-esteem. The church provides personal and emotional support as well as spiritual guidance (Taylor, 1993).

The element of religion distinguishes Jews from other ethnic groups defined by national origin and/or language; consequently Jews may be considered to be a religioethnic group. Within this designation one will find Orthodox Jews, Conservative Jews, and Reform Jews. Orthodox Jews adhere to traditional values, and conservatives hold to traditional values but are more flexible than Orthodoxes in the demands placed on members. Elderly Jews are more often members of Orthodox synagogues. These preferences influence the value systems and interaction patterns of individual Jews (Kart, 1987).

The myth that ethnic communities “take care of their own” clouds the reality of experience in Lebanese American families. Some families follow an ideal traditional pattern, which claims that aging members should be cared for in the context of the extended family. Like the elderly in other ethnic groups, Lebanese Americans strive to remain on their own and care for themselves as long as they can. They would rather that children visit (Shenk, 1990).

In other instances support is expected but is not forthcoming. The elderly expect to hold a viable role in the extended family. Shenk presented the case of Mrs. Khoury, a widow whose expectations for assistance and support are not met. Her son and daughter-in-law provide her with meals, take her shopping, and keep her
house in good repair. They do the best they can within the limits of their life-style and job responsibilities. The problem is their inability to meet aging Mrs. Khoury's high expectations. A number of families may be confronted with this problem as attitudes and values of the young Lebanese Americans change and expectations of the elderly remain the same.

Continuity is a fundamental necessity for human life, collectively and individually. The elderly offer continuity in the social, cultural, historical, and spiritual aspects of our lives (Myerhoff, 1978). Knowledge about ethnic dispositions related to death increases. We understand more when urban Native Americans return to the reservation as old age approaches. Many who have lived in cities wish to be buried on the reservation, a desire that is indicative of a sacredness of the land (DuBray, 1992).

Elderly African Americans accept death and are not fearful, sensing that they have completed the seasons of their life. Death may be a reason for celebration; festivity and music become an integral part of the grieving process (Brown, 1990). There are no studies that provide us with the Puerto Rican view of death, but literature, songs, poetry, and art reflect views of death. Attitudes, values, and interpretation of death are present in communities where expressions such as Que sera, sera (whatever will be, will be) or A todos se nos llega la hora (our time is set) reflect a value of fatalism. Fatalism means the universe and individuals are controlled by exterior forces (Campos, 1990).

Death does not always wait for the end of the life course, but if one is able to survive, the reality is that death usually occurs at the end of the life course. Death may be experienced with integrity or despair, with an acceptance of decline that recognizes the affirmation of the past, or with submission to the forces that seem designed to make life unbearable.

**SUMMARY**

In the life course concept, individuals move through life in various ways that are influenced by race, gender, ethnicity, or social class—the ethnicity reality. The concept helps us to understand that life experiences happen within the context of historical, individual, and social time. Tasks assigned to various positions in the life course respond to the ethnic dispositions of each group. This knowledge is essential for ethnic-sensitive practice.

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