MINORITY VOICES: Linking Personal Ethnic History and the Sociological Imagination

© 2005
John P. Myers

0-205-37850-1
(Please use above number to order your exam copy.)

Visit www.ablongman.com/replocator to contact your local Allyn & Bacon/Longman representative.

Sample chapter

The pages of this Sample Chapter may have slight variations in final published form.
In this section, four authors share parts of their family histories with us. None of them can speak to every time period that makes up the entirety of the overall dominant-minority relationship for his group. That is, none of the four writers personally experienced the first contact between Native Americans and the European invaders, between the Colonial American slave buyer and the recently abducted African, or between indigenous Mexican and Euro Americans. Nor were any members of the families now living eyewitnesses to the first contact. However, we can see though personal accounts the remnants, the harshly persistent residues, and the long-term impact of that first malevolent encounter.

We will see that the groups may not appear to be as clearly delineated—as separate—as they are in abstract discussion. Evidence of this seeming contradiction will appear throughout the book. While there is separation—especially with these three groups that all have racial underpinnings to the status of the group—there is always some degree of integration. However, the reader must be careful not to automatically equate integration with equality, no matter how intimate that mixing may appear to be. For example, in our past there were some slaves in the homes of their white owners, and these slaves were portrayed by writers like Margaret Mitchell (1968), for example, to be satisfied with their status, happy, and part of the family in some ways, but without any doubt they were not treated as equals. Furthermore, it is the height of irony that Edward Ball (1998) and others have written that slaves were members of “the family.” In more recent times, Douglas demonstrated in this reader that even though the members of his family were in many ways full members of the American culture, as African Americans they never saw themselves as equals in many social areas and always joined in the struggle for equality.

What the articles in this section verify is what Gunnar Myrdal (1944) called the American dilemma, a seemingly inexplicable and enigmatic contradiction of culture and social structure. While there was and continues to be a great deal of mixing and integration culturally, socially and biologically, there exists simultaneously and inextricably interwoven with that appearance of unity a tremendous ongoing and restless racial and ethnic mosaic. We see this time after time in the family histories presented herein—sons and daughters of multi-ethnic background that would seem to indicate real unity. But, as Fenelon shows us, his grandmother, who was descended from European and Native Americans, walked in worlds that were “in violent conflict.” And Calderon refers to his Mexican American family background as the “dialectic of inclusion and exclusion.”
In this part of the book we have four articles. One is on Native Americans, two are on African Americans, and one on Mexican Americans. Although the articles here are the main contributions for African and Native Americans, the Harrod article in the next section also deals with black-white relations in the South as well as Native Americans. Further on in the book Doane also addresses the question of race but from the dominant point of view. The English Americans who are described as settlers rather than immigrants also have interaction with the Native Americans that Doane describes. And the last two articles in the book that focus on mixed groups, which in this case refer to black-white marriages, bring us back to the question of race.

Addressing Native Americans, Fenelon is able to go far back in time to describe the complexity of his family background, which involves more than the simplistic dominant-minority relations. His contribution shows the intricacy and contradictions of this field well. Douglas and Cunnigen each write about their African American background. The accounts differ. Cunnigen’s perspective is from the rural Deep South. He is able to clearly and with detail see his slave roots, unlike most of us who are unable to peer back plainly into our family history for more than two generations. Douglas focuses on the northern and urban experience. Both emphasize the traditional values their families had, the importance of religion, the significance of family, and “silent smiles.” Both show achievement in a parallel social world, especially in earlier generations. Their families had many of the same values and goals as middle-class whites, with ideas about race being an overriding exception.

We will now preview the articles in more detail using ideas from the five questions developed from the model that integrates functional and conflict theories. Many of the experiences recounted by the authors in this section seem to fall into the “ongoing tactics” used by the dominant group to maintain dominance. As noted above, neither the authors nor the members of their families can report witnessing the moment of “initial contact,” making it more difficult to address the first two questions with knowledge based on personal experience. However, all members of the four families are keenly aware of the nature of that first encounter and its ongoing ramifications.

While none of the authors was firsthand witness to the initial contact, they all experienced direct reverberations from the initial position manifested by members of the dominant group. Nowhere is the conflict nature of dominant-minority relations more clearly illustrated than in the history of Native Americans. Fenelon gives us some of the more subtle nuances of the conflict relationship as well as examples of the more violent ones with which we are all familiar. He notes that they were called “hostiles,” he refers to land being stolen, and reminds us that once the dominant, group achieved demographic and military dominance, they broke treaties with American Indians.

Calderon describes the violent and exploitive relationship the dominant group foisted on Mexican Americans from the very beginning. This was accompanied by a system of virulent prejudice and discrimination that was initiated at the onset of the relationship.

Clearly, the early meetings of the dominant group with representatives of all of the three groups in this section were very conflict oriented, containing long periods of military-like relationships. In fact, the relationship between the dominant group and African Americans was similar to a state of war. African Americans, particularly in the slavery period, have been referred to as “prisoners of war” (Myers 2003:187).
Cunnigen did not witness the state of war called slavery firsthand, but he has knowledge of family history that was passed down through the generations showing that his great-great grandparents were slaves that were “sold ‘down river’ to slave states.” He knows what his distant grandmother did as a slave: She was a cook. And because of this somewhat elevated status, the everyday brutality endured by her fellow slaves who were field hands often passed her by. However, the cook’s status did not exempt her from the other omnipresent facets of the cruelly harsh life of a slave.

Cunnigen shares another example of the initial extreme conflict position of the dominant group. He notes that his great-grandfather was a runaway slave. Showing the “property status” of slaves, Cunnigen notes that he was “captured” as contraband. A further example of the status of black Americans in general is illustrated by an incident retold by his ancestor, a tanner, who was asked to convert the skin of a lynched black man into shoes. Only in places like Hitler’s Germany are such atrocities equaled.

Generally, there are two ways that the minority group can respond to initial dominant group hostility and violence: They can fight back or accommodate. Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans all fought back in varied ways. As was the case with the initial dominant group position, none of the authors was a firsthand witness to such very early responses of their respective groups. None saw the resistance to being extricated from Africa, the struggles that took place during the *middle passage*, or the slave rebellions in the American Colonies and the newly formed United States. Nor did any of the four contributors to this section personally see American Indians fighting the European invaders for their lands and way of life. Neither did any of the authors participate in the violent resistance to the expansion of the country into what is now the southwest United States. However, they all experienced the aftershocks of such resistance, and they all endured the ongoing accommodations to domination. One of the major adaptations, which in the long run has the potential to benefit a group, was geographic, cultural, and social separation.

With the Native Americans, Fenelon draws attention to the dominant group’s programs to separate Indians and also exposes the Anglo propensity to be isomorphic. He notes that the U.S. government often forced ethnically different Native American groups together and gave them political identity. Certainly seeing disparate groups as one was wrong, but forcing them to coalesce was a potential basis for the generation of power.

The separation experienced by Native Americans that manifested itself in what we called *reservations* offered some protection and the potential for unity and power. This potential to generate power was grossly outweighed by the ongoing practices of oppression employed by the dominant group, resulting in both a long period of separation and little generation of power.

The theory we are highlighting emphasizes initial dominant group hostility, resulting in separation of the minority group in many ways. This hostility leading to separation can be seen as the beginning of a possibility for the minority group to generate power and solidarity.

We can see the accommodation of accepting separation when Douglas talks about Effie Wilson, a black woman with limited education who became a teacher in an all-black school. Douglas also shows us about the church as a separate institution: a reaction to dominant group hostility. The black church illustrates the formation of separate but parallel religious institutions. Douglas illustrates how the African American
church met not only spiritual needs but economic ones as well. He describes Arthur Douglas, Sr., a member of the church who supported self-help, self-reliance, thrift, frugality, entrepreneurship, and economic and political advancement as a basis for empowering black Americans.

Douglas’s description of his family’s support of W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey also illustrates an accommodating but ever resistant response of the African Americans. Most white Americans saw Du Bois as a dangerous revolutionary, thus just by supporting the ideas of Du Bois, blacks were seen as fighting white oppression. Similarly, the great majority of whites did not accept Garvey’s beliefs and actions.

Cunnigen clearly shows that while his family accommodated to dominant group oppression they showed the most extreme resistance. What suggests struggle more than running away? The example of the Cunnigen slave whose refusal to violate the remains of a lynched black man gives us a real feel for the dynamics of the situation: acceptance of slavery but symbolic resistance.

Calderon speaks of the long history of resistance Mexican Americans have shown. His article shows that he is part of the continuing struggle and accommodation that has extended through many generations of his family. Calderon talks about the Ault, Colorado, community: “We lived . . . in a farm worker barrio that was close knit and where everyone knew and cared for each other.”

When searching for ongoing tactics used by the dominant group to oppress other groups, we do have personally passed-down-among-family accounts of the ongoing tactics of oppression. Fenelon likens the American Indians’ relationship to members of the dominant group to that of the Irish and the English in the nineteenth century, where the English instituted penal laws that controlled and handicapped almost every aspect of the lives of Irish people, including the right to intermarry. He notes that Native Americans were drafted into the military, but they were not citizens. They were attacked by armies of the dominant group and harassed by members of the Ku Klux Klan. He describes how the school systems worked to chip away at his people’s self-esteem.

Douglas and Calderon describe how members of their families were economically exploited. Douglas also describes how some of his family when traveling “back to the South” had to change trains in Washington, D.C., from the desegregated train to one for “colored persons only.” This was a heavy-handed symbol of ongoing oppression, reminding the Douglases of where they stood in society.

Cunnigen gives examples of the far-reaching and repressive segregation in the South after the Civil War that extended well into the twentieth century. His mother received a teaching degree in the 1950s that reads “Jackson State College for Negroes.” Furthermore, unlike those used on many of the white European immigrant groups, the nature of the ongoing tactics used against African Americans was of the most extreme forms. Cunnigen talks about the lynching that took place close to where his family lived and the economic tyranny that led to poverty and sickness. He describes three members of one branch of his family who died of pneumonia in the early twentieth century. And he poignantly says that he will never forget “the fear in my mother’s face” when he describes the dominant group’s nefarious reactions to civil rights activists.

Cunnigen also describes the experience of moving into a new home. The key word here is new. Even though the home was located in the black section of town,
“whites would drive out in front of our home and stop to view the home. I remember my father keeping a shotgun near the front door just in case someone decided to do a bit more than point and shake his or her head.” The whites obviously thought the Cunnigens did not deserve to live in quarters that were above their racial status.

Calderon notes how language was used in his schools to maintain dominance. If Spanish names appeared on a class roster they were quickly changed. He notes that his name evolved from Jose Guillermo Zapata Calderon to Joe William Calderon during his tenure in school.

Calderon presents a clear case of ongoing oppression when he describes the lifelong harassment of his father by immigration officials. He describes being awakened in the night as a boy, his mother frantically looking for his father’s legal papers. One cannot help but think of apartheid South Africa, where blacks were required to keep legal documents that showed their status. And the almost comical story of very American Mayor Cortez nearly being deported because he went jogging without his papers shows the ugly face of ongoing oppression in everyday life. Imagine what it would be like if you had to be sure you had the right papers—and clothes on—every time you left your home.

Again, our authors were enthusiastic and passionate eyewitnesses to the development of their respective communities, and they all give examples of power from personal experiences. Fenelon talks about how World War II was a galvanizing experience for his community and how it engendered permanent structural and cultural changes for his family and the members of the Native American community. He describes the 1970s cultural revival movement and its positive impact on his Native American community. Using sports, education, and military experience as a springboard, he became a lawyer for the American Indian community.

Douglas recalls an African American community that was dominated by stable families headed by two parents, thus refuting the stereotypical image of dysfunctional communities. As a child he saw a neighborhood where there were tight circles of friends among people with similar interests. In describing these circles of friends, he brings to life the notion that ethnic solidarity generates community and, in turn, the potential for power: “Their interests and conversations tended to focus upon the status, conditions, and challenges facing the discussions/debates concerning the question: ‘What is the best way forward for the black people of the U.S.? ’” He notes that within these African American communities the members were expected to support and assist one another in dealing with dominant group prejudice and discrimination.

Douglas shows that the extent of separateness of the African American community is nowhere more clearly shown than in religion. From the experience of his family, he makes it obvious how the church was a dynamo for power and change. In addition to functioning as a religious institution, the church offered opportunities for advancement by providing leadership, education, and support of efforts to advance the African American people. He also gave insight into another institution—the press—showing that the Pittsburgh Courier, a leading black newspaper, played a crucial role in the lives of his parents.

Cunnigen describes a vastly separate black American community in the rural South. In fact, he stresses at several points that especially during his youth, his black community was insular and closed to the larger society. Going further back in time, he
describes the “family homestead” in the early 1900s and the community events surrounding it, such as the Christmas carolers. This community was forced to develop functions that the dominant group society refused to fulfill, such as the “African American hearse,” which symbolized the separate institution of dying. More importantly, Cunnigen describes the function of the church in the black community his family knew. The church facilitated and interconnected with other community services such as the Odd Fellows that “provided mutual aid to African Americans via benefit/insurance divisions.”

Education, too, was separate for Cunnigen and the members of his family. And, clearly, it was not separate but equal. Black people had to work much harder with much less.

Calderon describes how his community organized protests aimed at generating power for Mexican Americans. His descriptions of Cesar Chavez and the impact Chavez had on his life and the Mexican American community are very illustrative of the conceptual relationships we are trying to make here: separation, ethnic unity, solidarity leading to the generation of power. He talks about struggles for voting, labor organizing, and fights for curricular change in the schools.

As in many other ethnic groups, Calderon describes how his family solidarity carried over into community solidarity. “The community organizing efforts were also tied to the family, parents clubs, a role in helping elect the day care director and our local school board.”

Calderon also speaks to the larger Latino community. He shows us some real examples of unity and power with which he is personally involved. He tells of conservative campaigns like the “English the official language” movement, which was largely thwarted by the coalition efforts of various Latino groups.

Can we see examples of power sharing and assimilation based on ethnic unity and power? There are examples of gains. But, as Calderon notes, the gains are not without a price. “Making it” in America means giving up part of one’s self. He says, “I did not know it [as a boy] but the world at school, much like the larger society, was shaping my identity and knowledge of who I was.”

Forced cultural assimilation is a very clear part of the histories of each of these groups and is attested to by the family experiences. Fenelon concludes that well-meaning agents coerced Catholic converts, like his ancestor Marie McLaughlin. He also tells how Native American practices, like Ghost Dance, were suppressed sometimes with the use of violence.

As for African Americans, forced cultural assimilation is equally well known and far more complete than it was with Native Americans. Very few cultural artifacts from African societies survived the American slavery period. Douglas shows the results. Blacks in this society are very similar in culture to whites in many ways. In fact, the Douglas family was very traditional in that it was patriarchal, and women never worked out of the home in the early twentieth century. Family member involvement with the church was also very telling. The African American church, the generator of so much power and symbol of the black community, is about as culturally American as possible.

Cunnigen paints a picture that exemplifies a high degree of cultural assimilation with social structural separation. The family members were very similar to other (white) southerners: They were religious, Protestant, and valued education highly. Family relationships were of the utmost importance; as time went on smaller families were seen as
more desirable, and upward social mobility was held in high esteem. However, overall cultural assimilation, everyone speaking the same language, is not the same thing as seeing and evaluating social reality in the same way. Cunnigen gives a perfect example:

After the death of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, our [black] school held a brief memorial service. . . . As a member of the Boy Scouts troop who served as an honor guard, I remember the depth of sorrow expressed by the students. On the other hand, the white students in nearby McComb High School cheered at a campus assembly when Kennedy’s assassination was announced to the student body. . . . Kennedy’s support of James Meredith’s admission to the University of Mississippi as well as the proposed civil rights bill were anathema to Mississippi’s white segregationists.

So, while there were large cultural agreements, there were still clear examples of value and social separations.

The social separations are most obvious the further back in time one travels. The separate black community in rural Mississippi that Cunnigen describes from his first-hand experiences as well as earlier generations’ depicts “a protective cocoon.” The structural barriers include major institutional phenomena such as religion, education, political participation, and the military, but also include more micro-level activities such as attending to the dead. Individuals in the Cunnigen family had to go north to experience some degree of social structural assimilation.

One might conclude that cultural assimilation with social structural pluralism was not such a bad thing for the Cunnigen family. After all, the black community provided all the services needed for sustenance. To understand this seeming contradiction, one need only read Cunnigen’s description of what happened to his family during the civil rights struggle. He was sent away during some of the most dangerous times. The words that come to mind when reading about this time period from this family’s point of view are terror and terrorists: Ammonia was tossed in the face of a local woman, the (black) school principal’s home was bombed, and real terror gripped especially the adults during most of their waking hours.

Calderon’s example of playing cowboys and Indians in his boyhood in the Mexican American community shows how far-reaching cultural seduction extended. When they played the Lone Ranger, everyone wanted to be “Kemo Sabe” (the Anglo hero) and no one wanted to be Tonto (the loyal and obedient Native American sidekick), even though they all resembled the darker-skinned Tonto.

In the area of social structural change, Calderon notes that he was an exception to the rule in his community. He was accepted socially more than some in high school because of his involvement in and success in sports. However, the gap between him and his parents was made crystal clear:

Through my four years of high school basketball, my parents never showed up to the annual ‘parent’s honor night’ sponsored by the school. . . . My parents refused to go, always excusing themselves by sharing that they did not have the proper clothes for the occasion and that they did not know anyone there.

Calderon attributes his further success—his entrance into Anglo social structures—to earlier ethnic battles fought by Mexican Americans, enabling him to go to college.
Fenelon tells us that his grandfather was part of a unit made up mostly of Plains Indians in World War II. This is drastically different from Fenelon’s own, much more integrated military experience.

Douglas addresses the complex issue of identity and notes that his father was a “race man,” meaning that he was extremely conscious of the conditions of the black race and the challenges his family faced. It is clear that the identities of the members of the Douglas family as well as the identities of the Calderon and Fenelon families rest to a very large degree on race, ethnicity, and a social history of struggle. Nor would the Cunnigen family be what Milton Gordon (1964) called “identificationally assimilated.” While they possess many of the same material and nonmaterial parts of the American culture, they continue to define themselves as African Americans rather than Americans.

In summary, what the four articles show us is that the initial reaction of the dominant group to these nonwhite ethnic groups was an extreme conflict one. The minority groups were separated geographically and socially at the same time that they were in large measure forced to accept the dominant group culture. Each of the minority groups responded to the oppression with a great deal of resistance, but with few alternatives they also accommodated to a much more powerful people. The minority groups won clear and measurable gains. These gains were fought for and won by each succeeding generation as they became more unified and powerful. This battle took place against a tremendously powerful opponent that controlled the culture at large, the court system, elections, jobs, education, and housing. Today, while there are many examples of “successes” like these authors, racism and ethnocentrism still exist and keep many of the members of the minority groups in check and in inferior social positions compared to members of the dominant group.

NOTES

1. Margaret Mitchell’s (1968) depiction of slaves in her novel Gone with the Wind, written in the 1930s and subsequently made into a powerful movie that had a great impact on and reflected U.S. culture, showed slaves as happy on the plantation, being part of the family and supporting the Southern lifestyle that was based on slavery.

2. Edward Ball shows that there was interbreeding and intermarriage among members of the slave-owning Ball family and their slaves. So there were “slaves in the family,” which is the title of his book.

REFERENCES