The year is 1840. Seventeen-year-old John is a slave on a large South Carolina cotton plantation owned by a man named Franklin. When John was ten, the slave owner on the plantation where he was born sold him and his father and brothers. John was unable to keep track of his brothers and father, knowing only that a man named Brady from Mississippi bought them. His mother stayed at the old plantation, and John was separated from all of them to go to work at Franklin’s.
CHAPTER 3

When John was younger, his mother used to walk to his plantation occasionally to see him. She was permitted to make the twelve-mile walk between dusk and dawn; if she came home after dawn she was beaten. John’s mother died when he was thirteen, but he was not allowed to attend her funeral because it was harvest time and he had too much work to do.

John has a woman friend, Mary, whom he cares about and would like to marry, but Franklin, his owner, plans to sell her because she has already suffered a miscarriage and may be unable to bear any more children. Franklin has been talking about making John have sex with another slave woman, Caroline, because she is robust, and he believes that John and Caroline would produce strong children. John hears about a woman named Harriet Tubman who helps slaves escape. He decides to convince Mary that they should both go with her on the Underground Railroad up to Canada.

What kinds of family life were possible for African Americans under slavery?

How did the ideas and experiences of family for other racial ethnic groups such as whites, Latinos, Native Americans, and Chinese Americans differ from that of African Americans during slavery?

What kinds of choices did slaves have to make about family issues like marriage and children?

How does the extreme case of slavery help us see the importance of the effect of social context on families?

What happened after slavery? How did the new system of sharecropping, and later industrialization, affect family organization among African Americans?

Diversity in American Families

The United States is a nation of diversity. Many groups of people came to live here from Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the rest of the world. Before European contact, there were millions of Native Americans living in dozens of different nations throughout the hemisphere. This means that the cultural roots and the history of Americans are varied and complex (Root 1996).

In addition, many groups have been exploited or oppressed in a variety of ways. Several Native American groups were completely wiped out, and others were forced to march across the country to be “resettled” on the lands of other Native American peoples. As we saw in Chapter 2, Japanese who lived in the United States during World War II were forced out of their homes and communities and held in camps. Asians, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos have been and continue to be discriminated against and exploited as cheap labor in mines, fields, and sweatshops across the country.

These various groups have their own histories of family organization, which are different from the history of white Americans. Family sociologists, therefore, are presented with the dilemma of needing to pay close attention to diversity, but finding it impossible to cover all of the possibilities in one book.

In our examination of the historical development of families in this book, we focused in Chapter 2 on European Americans during the colonization of the United States, the westward
expansion, and the period of immigration and urbanization. We also explored examples of Japanese, Chinese, and Native American families. In this chapter we turn our attention to African Americans during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

Among all the possible groups that could be examined, African American families have been chosen for special attention for several reasons. First, there is a large body of literature on African Americans and African American families (DuBois 1908/1969). Less research has been done on other groups of people, for example, Cherokees, Vietnamese Americans, or Latino Americans (Roosa, Morgan-Lopez, Cree, and Spector 2002).

Second, until the 2000 Census African Americans were the largest racial ethnic group in the United States. Table 3.1 shows how the distribution of various racial ethnic groups has changed over the centuries. Table 5.1 in Chapter 5 shows the most recent data: African Americans make up 12.3 percent of the total population, whites 63.2 percent, and Hispanics 15.1 percent; all other groups make up the remaining 9.4 percent. Hispanics are now the largest minority group. Historically, however, African Americans have been the largest minority group. In 1860, African Americans made up 14 percent of the total U.S. population and 36.4 percent of the population in the southern states (U.S. Census Bureau 1975). In 1800, ten years after the first Census, African Americans comprised almost one-third of those counted.

Third, African Americans are the only group of people who were legally enslaved for a long period of time (more than two hundred years) in the United States. They are also the only group that was legally segregated in a large region (the entire South) for a long period of time (from 1877, the end of Reconstruction, until the passage of the Civil Rights Bill in 1964). Finally, African Americans are the only group of people for whom a civil war was fought at least in part over the question of whether to end their enslavement.

In a sense, then, African Americans are a special case, and when we study their family history, we need to keep that in mind. On the other hand, examining the changes over time in the organization of African American families and their relationship to the changing social context should help us develop principles that might be tested in the cases of the many other peoples of the United States.

Throughout the chapter we will see the way in which the macrolevel of social organization affected the microlevel of everyday life for African American people. The key element in the macrolevel that we explore in this chapter is the political economy. A political economy is the manner in which a society organizes its political and economic institutions.

### Table 3.1 Racial and Ethnic Populations as a Proportion of Total U.S. Population, 1800–2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
<td>69.1%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians/Other</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political institutions refer to the organization and distribution of power and decision making. Economic institutions are those that produce and distribute the goods people use to survive.

Slavery, for example, was a particular type of political economy that had an enormous effect on the family lives of slaves. Our review of the macrolevel of political economy and its effect on families will show how the political economy changed and in turn created changes at the microlevel. In addition, this history will show the ways in which African Americans working in social networks at the microlevel fought back in attempts to alter both their family organization and the larger, oppressive political economy.

This chapter is organized into three major sections. The first section reviews the history of African Americans and is divided into a number of subsections that cover slavery, sharecropping, and the industrialization of the South. I discuss the relationships between African American men and women and adults and children in each of these periods and compare the organization of African American families to that of middle-class whites. The second section focuses on the central role played by issues related to families in the struggle to create equality and to end the oppression of African American people. In Chapter 5 we pick up this history again and look at recent developments in African American family history during the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

The third major section examines the history of Latino Americans beginning with the Mexican American War which transferred a huge piece of land in North America from Mexico to the United States. Latinos comprise an increasingly larger and more important sector of the population as well. Historically they were a smaller population in the United States than African Americans. Their numbers today, however, have now surpassed African Americans, and in some states in the west and southwest, people whose families came from Latin America or whose families lived in areas that were formerly part of Mexico are the majority. The history of the migration of Latinos to the United States and the claiming of the land that was originally Mexico and ways in which these historical forces shaped Latino families are addressed in this chapter.

Four Periods in African American History

The history of African Americans can be traced through four historical periods, each creating a different social context for families. The four historical periods are (1) slavery, 1600 to 1865; (2) sharecropping, 1865 to 1940; (3) industrialization, 1940 to 1965; and (4) the New South or post–Civil Rights era, since 1965 (Scott 1988). In each of these periods, different family forms dominated among African Americans. As we observed in Chapter 2 among European Americans and Chinese Americans, families changed over time as the economic context evolved. The periods and the transitions, however, were quite different for African Americans compared with these other two groups. This chapter examines the first three of the periods. In the rest of the book, we will be looking at the four periods of contemporary families.

Slavery

During the period of slavery, which lasted from colonial times until the end of the Civil War, the experience of most African Americans was tied to a particular region in the United States: the South. "At the end of the nineteenth century, nine out of ten Afro-Americans
lived in the South” (J. Jones 1985, p. 80). Although the Southern states were part of the United States, they maintained a political and economic system that differed dramatically from that of the North. Until the end of the Civil War, the Southern states had a separate and unique political economy: the American slave system.

The political economy of slavery was characterized by segregation between whites and African Americans, the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of very few whites, and the ownership of nearly all African Americans as a form of property. The dominant economic activity in the region was the production of agricultural products, especially cotton, for export to the North and to Europe. Huge plantations covered the South, each using the labor of hundreds of slaves. The plantation economy was enormously wealthy, and production by the slave laborers created a large proportion of the total economic output of the entire nation. In the mid-1800s, 5.4 million bales of cotton a year were produced by Southern plantations, accounting for 75 percent of the total U.S. exports (Keller 1983).

About 90 percent of African Americans were slaves who had no civil or legal rights but were considered the property of the slave owners. The other 10 percent of the African American population during this time were not slaves. They were called freedmen, but their rights were curtailed as well. Most freedmen lived in such urban areas as Charleston and New Orleans and worked in skilled trades.

Most whites were not slaveholders and were not part of the plantation economy. About 25 percent of Southern whites owned one or more slaves, and about 15 percent owned large numbers on enormous plantations. The large slaveholders owned huge plots of land where the soil was richest. The rest of the whites (75 percent) had little power in political institutions and were not part of the dominant economic activity. They worked as subsistence farmers in less-productive agricultural areas.

Early in the development of the slave system in the United States, the Northern states of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island had legally sanctioned slavery. In fact, in New York City in 1741 twenty-three armed slaves burned down a slave owner’s house. The incident developed into an insurrection by hundreds of African American and poor white people, two hundred of whom were eventually arrested. Thirty-one African Americans and four whites were subsequently executed (Zinn 1980).

The number of people who were enslaved in the Northern states, however, was relatively small, and the system disappeared there in the eighteenth century. In the South, in contrast, slavery was legally established in Virginia in 1640 and lasted in the states that seceded from the Union—Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, and Tennessee—until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. In the slave states that did not secede—Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri—legal slavery finally ended in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Since the Civil War, the Southern political economy has remained somewhat different from that of other regions in the United States because segregation and discrimination were legal until the 1960s. A system of legal segregation is called de jure segregation. Those black people who moved north or west also lived segregated lives in separate neighborhoods, held different jobs, and attended separate schools, but in those areas the system of segregation usually was not stated in the laws. This is called de facto segregation because although it is not specified in the laws, it nevertheless exists. Throughout the United States,
African Americans have experienced a history that was different from but highly interrelated with that of other racial ethnic groups. Family organization for African Americans, not surprisingly, has been different from that of whites and other groups of Americans.

**Family Life under Slavery.** Historians are still debating about which family form was dominant among African Americans in the slave community. Some scholars argue the nuclear family was the most common family form among slaves (Gutman 1976). A nuclear family is one in which a legally married husband and wife and their children live together. Slavery interfered with this kind of family organization. Slaves could be bought and sold, seized in payment of a master’s debts, and inherited. African American families under slavery, therefore, lived in constant fear of separation. Even for women and men who lived together as husbands and wives, legal marriage was not possible. Since slaves were property, they had no legal right to make a contract, including a marriage contract. The slave owner had complete legal authority over his slaves, and it was the slave owner who decided who could live with whom.

Neither was monogamy legal for slaves. Monogamy is the practice of marrying only one person at a time and remaining sexually exclusive with that person. Slave women were constantly sexually abused by white men, and they had no legal right to resist that abuse. “To oppose the rape of black women in effect meant opposing slavery. A black woman’s body was not considered her own. Control over her body was passed from white person to white person along with a bill of sale” (Hymowitz and Weissman 1978, p. 51).

**Box 3.1**

**Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson**

For a long time, historians have been debating whether President Thomas Jefferson had sexual relations with his slaves that produced slave children. During his presidency, a journalist named James Callender was the first to publicly make such charges. Many others have debated the issue since then. Recently, biologists have provided empirical evidence of these relationships through DNA tests. The tests conclude that at least one of Sally Hemings’s seven children was fathered by Jefferson (Lander and Ellis 1998).

Sally Hemings was a slave who was owned by Jefferson. She was the half-sister of his wife because Mrs. Jefferson’s father had sexual relations with Hemings’s mother, who was also a slave. When Jefferson first engaged in sex with Hemings, she was only about fourteen years old, thirty years younger than he was. Their sexual relationship lasted for a long time, and at least one of the children she bore was his. Jefferson never freed Hemings or his children who were born to her (Burstein, Isenberg, and Gordon-Reed 1999).

Some scholars have portrayed the relationship between Hemings and Jefferson as a love affair. Others have questioned whether a teenage slave who had no right to refuse her master’s sexual advances could enter into a relationship of love or even consent. What do you think of this debate? Were slave women who were subjected to sex with their owners sometimes their lovers? Or were these encounters always a form of rape since the women could not voice their own feelings, and, regardless of their feelings, they did not have the right to refuse the slave owner?
In 1855, a nineteen-year-old slave woman was hanged because she defended herself against a rapist. Celia, who had no last name, had been repeatedly raped by her owner since she was fourteen years old. She had borne two children as a result of the rapes and had begged the rapist’s two legitimate adult daughters to help her stop him, but they refused. One night in desperation she killed her master. The jury did not accept her argument that the murder had been in self-defense, and she was sentenced to be executed (McLaurin 1992).

Slave parents also had no legal rights in regard to their children (King 1995). Children could be sold away from their mother at any age: “The young of slaves stand on the same footing as any other animal” (Davis 1981, p. 7). In a famous statement, Sojourner Truth, an African American woman active in the abolitionist movement and the women’s movement, describes her experience as a parent under slavery: “I have borne thirteen chillun and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off into slavery and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard” (Lowenberg and Bogin 1976, p. 235).

The threat of separation of parents and children was constantly feared. It was evident even in the play of slave children. In the 1930s, former slaves were interviewed about their lives under slavery. David Wiggins (1985) studied the play of slave children by examining these statements. He found that one of the games the slave children played was called auction. One of the children acted as the auctioneer and conducted a simulated slave sale.

Even when children were not separated from their parents, they had little authority over them. One former slave woman, remembering her childhood, said, “When de young folks wanted to go dey didn’t have to ax their mama an’ papa, dey axed de white folks an ef de white folks said yes it was all right wid dem. See we b’long to de white folks, not to our mamas and papas” (Blassingame 1977, p. 644).

Worse than not having authority over their children, parents who were slaves did not have the right to protect their children. One woman who had been a slave explained, “Many a day my old mama has stood by and watched massa beat her chillun ‘til dey bled an’ she couldn’t open her mouth” (Perdue and Barden 1976, p. 149).

At about thirteen, children were expected to work full time in the fields. Before then they performed chores like hauling water, tending gardens, fetching wood, cleaning the yard, feeding livestock, and caring for younger children (Corsaro 1997).

Like all social systems, slavery was not uniform in its expression. The laws forbade slaves to marry, and slave masters had the final say in the organization of the family lives of their slaves. Nevertheless, some slaveholders were more lenient than others and allowed some small “privileges,” acknowledging slave marriages. More important, family issues such as marriage were arenas of constant struggle between slaves and slave owners. In some cases, slaves were able to bend the rules in order to attempt to maintain relationships of parenthood and monogamous marriage.

Herbert Gutman (1976) is the most prominent of the scholars who argue that despite the legal sanctions against nuclear families, the slaves themselves maintained complex, organized systems of rules, expectations, and emotional relationships among husbands and wives and parents and children. As evidence of nuclear families, Gutman notes, for example, that slaves had their own rituals that displayed their marriages to their community. One of these rituals was called jumping the broom. The broom represents the domestic life the couple will share with one another. The bride and groom jumped over a broom handle as a symbol of their commitment to each other.
Gutman also examined historical documents that showed how slaves maintained strong family ties even when it meant risking severe punishment. In the scenario at the beginning of this chapter, John tells how his mother used to walk thirteen miles to visit him at night. This is based on the true story of Frederick Douglass, who was a slave and who wrote about his mother traveling twelve miles to visit him after he was sold to another plantation. Gutman argues that this kind of sacrifice to preserve links between parents and children, siblings, and husbands and wives was common.

Slave men who were married to women who lived on different plantations were allowed to visit their wives, whom they called “abroadwives,” but the journey was dangerous:

The men were given passes to visit their wives on Wednesday and Saturday nights and all day Sunday. In their journey to the other plantation the black men had to deal with “Patterollers” who were patrols of whites whose task was to see that no slaves traveled about at night without the proper credentials. The Patterollers were notorious for their brutality. (Hymowitz and Weissman 1978)

If slaves visited other plantations without carrying the proper documents, they were likely to be beaten or killed. In 1712, the state of South Carolina passed “an Act for better ordering and governing of Negroes and slaves. If a slave was caught away from his or her plantation without a ‘ticket’ from the master’s plantation, ‘it is hereby declared lawful for any white person to beat, maim, or assault, and if such Negro or slave cannot otherwise be taken, to kill him’” (Act 1992).

Others tried to find their kin by running away. The most common reason people ran away was resentment over punishment. The second most common reason was to find relatives (Genovese 1972). Numerous newspaper advertisements refer to runaway slaves whom slave owners believed to be fleeing to make contact with their families. One ad, for example, describes a fourteen-year-old who was thought to have fled to Atlanta, where his mother had been sent. Another ad was for a mother who had escaped to find her children at another plantation. Husbands sought wives and wives husbands (Franklin 1988).

On plantations, slaves also preferred to organize their lives to emphasize the importance of nuclear family units. For example, sons were frequently named after their fathers, and both sons and daughters were named after blood relatives (Gutman 1976). Slave women preferred cooking for their own families to taking their meals in a communal kitchen, even when it meant additional work. In some cases, when plantation owners tried to establish communal kitchens, slaves refused them (Hymowitz and Weissman 1978). Thus, the ability to maintain control over family life and especially the right to establish nuclear families was a point of constant struggle between slaves and slave owners.

Family Organization and Black Women’s Role in a Community of Slaves. Angela Davis is an African American scholar and activist who has examined the organization of families under slavery and the relationship between African American family organization and African American women’s political activity. Davis’s (1981) point of view differs somewhat from Gutman’s. Like W. E. B. DuBois (1908/1969), one of the earliest scholars of African American culture, Davis argues that slaves may have aspired to live in nuclear families and may have gone to great lengths to maintain contact with their families, but slavery ultimately disrupted the nuclear family. Davis is quick to point out, however, that the difficulty of maintaining nuclear families did not mean that slaves had no families.
Gutman’s work tends to emphasize those people who were successful in establishing and maintaining nuclear family organization. Davis’s work tends to emphasize the alternative kinds of families that were established within the slave community. Both these scholars’ research indicates that even within a system as harsh and restrictive as slavery, a variety of families existed (Pargas 2008).

Davis believes that her work shows that the dominant family organization among slaves was an extended family that consisted of both kin (people related by blood) and fictive kin (people who are not related by blood but are close personal friends). She argues that the intensity of the labor demanded of slaves and the disruption of marriages and relationships between parents and children meant that people relied on a wider circle of social contacts than a nuclear family. This wider circle included both relatives and others in the community.

When Wiggins (1985) examined the narratives of former slaves talking about the games slave children played, he found evidence of the cohesiveness of the entire community of slaves and the lack of boundaries between groups within the community. A theme that ran through all of the narratives was the absence of any games that required the elimination of players; all players stayed in all the games. He argues that this was a reaction to the possibility that members of a slave community might be sold suddenly. Keeping all players in the game shows the value placed on the maintenance of community that characterized the culture of African Americans under slavery.

One of the features of the extended community-based family was a sharing of responsibility for food and shelter. In a community made up of nuclear families, each family is an economic unit that divides the labor among its members. In the community of slaves, Davis (1981) argues, much of the domestic work of supporting the community was done communally by slave women. For example, “most infants and toddlers spent the day in a children’s house, where an elderly slave was in charge” (Hymowitz and Weissman 1978, p. 47).

Davis points out that the only work that was done by slaves that contributed to the survival of the slaves themselves—as opposed to contributing only to the lives of the slave owners—was the domestic work in the community that fed and provided clothes, health care, and shelter for its members. All the other work done by slaves, in the fields and in the slave owner’s house, was done for the white plantation owners and served no useful purpose for the slave community.

James Curry, a former slave, described the work of his mother, a house servant who labored both for the plantation owner and for the other slaves:

My mother’s labor was very hard. She would go to the plantation owner’s house in the morning, take her pail upon her head, and go away to the cow-pen, and milk fourteen cows. She then put on the bread for the white family breakfast, and got the cream ready for churning, and set a little child to churn it, she having the care of from ten to fifteen children, whose mothers worked in the field. After clearing away the family breakfast, she got breakfast for the slaves—which was taken at twelve o’clock. In the meantime, she had beds to make, rooms to sweep and clean. Then she cooked the white family dinner. Then the slaves’ dinner was to be ready at from eight to nine o’clock in the evening. At night she had the cows to milk again. This was her work day to day. Then in the course of the week, she had the washing and ironing to do for the master’s family—and for her husband, seven children, and herself. She would not get through to go to her log cabin until nine or ten o’clock at night. She would then be so tired that she could scarcely stand; but she would find one boy with his knee out, and another with his elbow out, a patch wanting here and a stitch there, and she would sit down by her light—a wood fire, and sew and sleep alternately, often till the light began to streak in the east; and then lying down, she would catch a nap and hasten to the toil of the day. (Blassingame 1977, pp. 132–133)
Davis (1981) maintains that the critical contribution of women doing this survival labor within the slave community enhanced their value to the community. Women were essential to the community’s survival. Davis also argues that the recognition of women as critical members of the community allowed them to emerge as important political leaders. Davis (1981) found that African American women took leadership in many community activities. For example, African American women played an active role in the Underground Railroad and other forms of insurrection against the slave system. Women were likely to initiate and implement acts of sabotage, arson, and assassination as part of an ongoing battle against slavery. Sometimes domestic work itself was openly political, for example, when women fed runaway slaves, thus aiding them in their journey (Aptheker 1943).

This kind of resistance was so common that a law was passed in South Carolina requiring that plantation owners regularly search slave quarters for runaways and arms. The act read, “Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that every master, mistress or overseer of a family of this Province, shall cause all his Negro houses to be searched diligently and effectually, on every fourteen days, for fugitive and runaway slaves, guns, swords, clubs and any other mischievous weapons” (Act 1992, p. 260).

The political activity of African American women was not practiced without African American men. Rather, just as the oppression and exploitation of black women was equal to that of black men, there was an equality in their struggle against the system (Davis 1981).

Davis (1981) provides much evidence that the African American family was community based as opposed to nuclear and that it included many people, kin and nonkin, working together. Why did this particular type of family occur in the slave community? Davis contends that the extended character of the families in the slave community resulted from the difficulties of establishing nuclear families (see also DuBois 1908/1969). Others (R. Hill, 1993; Sudarkasa 1988) take a different position on this question. They agree with Davis that the dominant form of family in the slave community was an extended kin-based network family. They argue, however, that the organization of African American families during slavery and up to

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**Box 3.2**

**Slave Narratives**

In the 1930s, the federal government decided to conduct a massive research project to save the history of slavery from the point of view of people who had been slaves. Between 1936 and 1938, two thousand three hundred former slaves were interviewed by writers and journalists hired by the Works Project Administration’s Writer’s Project. These interviews exist in sound tapes and are collected in a forty-one-volume series titled *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* by George P. Rawick. The interviews vary in length, and some of them are colored by the prejudiced viewpoint of the writers who conducted the interviews and wrote them into narratives. The interviews as a set, however, provide a rich source of information about slavery. The interviewees talk about their daily lives as well as extraordinary events. Since slavery ended in the 1860s and the interviews were conducted in the 1930s, the interviewees were over the age of seventy. A long time had passed since they had been slaves. The memories, however, are clear. They give vivid firsthand accounts of brutality, work, family life, and religion during slavery.
the present has been influenced by the cultural roots of West African societies. In contrast to
Davis, scholars such as Hill (1993) and Sudarkasa (1988) maintain that extended families were
not created as a survival tactic in the unique situation of slavery. Rather, this form of family
came from the African cultures from which African Americans had been taken.

One group of people who may have been especially important to passing down informa-
tion about Africa were elderly slaves (Close 1997; King 1995). The hardships of slavery
meant that few slaves lived to be older adults. For example, in one census of slaves at Kelvin
Plantation in Saint Simons Island, Georgia, eighty-one slaves were listed, but only four were
over the age of fifty: “Molly 60, fl hand; Robin 80, hand; Elsy 60, hand; and Sam 70, gar-
dener” (King 1995, p. 18). This list shows that even elderly slaves were expected to work
for the plantation owner. But elderly slaves had more time to spend with children, and dur-
ing the time they cared for slave children, they passed down knowledge about their ances-
tors’ culture through songs, games, and stories (Close 1997).

Robert Hill (1993) argues that one aspect of this cultural heritage was family organ-
ization. He describes West African families as differing from nuclear families in three dimen-
sions. First, the African concept of family includes many people who may not actually live
in the same household. Second, extended kin (blood relatives like grandparents and cousins)
are thought of and treated as family instead of limiting family to nuclear members only.
Third, Africans include as family many people who may not be related by blood. These
unrelated people may be incorporated into a family through informal adoption and foster care.
These characteristics were ones that Davis found typical of families in the slave community.
She argues that these families were created in response to the experience of slavery. Hill
(1993) and Sudarkasa (1988) maintain that these families were part of the culture of black
Americans because their ancestors came from West African cultures.

Comparing White Middle-Class Women to African American Women in the Nineteen-
teenth Century. “Third wave feminism looks critically at the tendency of work done in
the 1960’s and 1970’s to use a generalized, monolithic concept of ‘woman’ as a generic cat-
egory in stratification and focuses instead on the factual and theoretical implications of dif-
ferences among women” (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1992, p. 480; see also Chow
1987; Dill 1983; hooks 1984). Jacqueline Jones (1985) is an example of a third-wave fem-
inist. Her work allows us to make a comparison between black women and white women liv-
ing in the United States during the nineteenth century.

We noted in the last chapter that during the nineteenth century, white women in middle-
class and upper-class families were identified with domesticity. Jones (1985) found that in
addition to the work they did for the white plantation owner, black women also performed
much domestic work in the slave community. The division of labor in both Northern middle-
class white families and in the Southern slave community assigned women to cooking, child
care, and sewing.

As I described in the last chapter, according to the cult of true womanhood, white
women were supposed to make their family work the center of their lives. Their identifica-
tion with domesticity diminished white women’s importance in the community, since their
domestic work kept them away from activities in the economic and political world that were
the seats of power. As a result, women’s work was invisible, and women’s attempts to have
any effect on politics were discouraged or even banned.
CHAPTER 3

We have seen that African American women were doing the same household work as middle-class white women, but in a very different context and with a very different effect. Black women's domestic activities performed in service to the adults and children of the slave community enhanced their importance to that community and their ability to serve the political struggle against slavery. At the same time the African American community allowed, encouraged, and even demanded that African American slave women run an Underground Railroad and burn down plantations, the white community would not even allow white women to speak before a crowd (Dill 1986).

This contrast between white women and African American women shows that the assignment of women to certain kinds of family work—cooking, child care, sewing, and the like—does not necessarily give women power nor does it diminish their power. It is the combination of the division of work in families and the relationship of families to the dominant political structure that creates opportunities for women to emerge as leaders or to be victims.

Reproduction. Slave owners attempted to treat women and men slaves the same way, working them all to their maximum ability and treating them all with the same ruthlessness, regardless of their sex. One problem with this strategy for the slave owners, however, was the need to replenish the numbers of slaves. Laws passed in 1807 made it illegal to import slaves from other nations, so the population of slaves could be increased only by allowing slave women to bear children. The physical demands of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing an infant were not easily combined with starvation, brutality, and exhausting and difficult work on the plantations. The “solution” that the plantation owners developed was to divide the work between different groups of slave women. Women in the border states were forced to bear large numbers of children, and fertility levels in the upper South neared human capacity. Records show that slave women in Kentucky had high birthrates, bearing as many as twelve or thirteen children. Records also indicate that some slave owners offered the women freedom or let them stay in their marriages if they bore large numbers of children (D. White 1985). Lacking the large, lucrative cotton plantations of the Deep South, slave owners in the border areas turned the production of slaves into their dominant industry.

At the same time, the huge agricultural operations of the Deep South, which were highly productive, literally worked people to death. Women in the lower South were worked so hard that they were often unable to bear children. Slave women in Mississippi, for example, had low birthrates because of their large number of miscarriages, especially during the cotton boom years of 1830 to 1860 (J. Jones 1985).

In a nuclear family, the task of reproduction is divided between the husband and wife. The wife bears the children and frequently cares for the young infants. Under the slave system, the task of reproduction was divided among women based on where they lived and what role they played within the system as a whole.

Sharecropping

After the slave system was abolished by the Civil War, a new economic system called sharecropping was established in the South, and a different form of family developed for African Americans who lived there. The sharecropping system guaranteed that ex-slaves
would continue to be available to work the land after the Civil War. Jay Mandle (1978) defines sharecropping as a crop lien system in which sharecroppers pledged their unplanted crops to landowners or local merchants, frequently at high interest rates.

The arrangements of sharecropping varied, but typically sharecroppers received the use of a house, tools, farm animals, and a plot of land in exchange for a portion of the crop they produced. The rest of the crop was due to the landowner. Regardless of how good a year it was, the landowner demanded his due. If there was drought or insect infestation, the sharecropper still owed the landowner for the tools, farm animals, and the value of the crop that would have been available in a good year. This resulted in sharecroppers being in constant debt to the landowners and, therefore, unable to leave the plantation (Mandle 1978, p. 18).

Work for African Americans was much the same after the transition from slavery to sharecropping. Families, however, changed in important ways as African Americans sought to allow women to reduce their work in the fields so that they could take care of their families.

Although the Civil War made it illegal for plantation masters to own slaves, for the most part the old slaveholders still owned the land. African American people who had lived in the region as slaves before the war now lived as sharecroppers on farms that were owned by the landholders after the war. Sharecropping was similar to slavery in other ways. Both slaves and sharecroppers worked the land for the plantation owner, had few rights, were frequently subjected to barbarous treatment at the hands of the landowner, and lived hard, impoverished lives.

In addition, sharecroppers had little opportunity to move away from the plantations. Sharecroppers were obligated to give the landowners a specific amount of salable produce regardless of the actual production of the farm. If the crops did not come in as well as the landowner stipulated they should, the sharecroppers still owed the same amount. Sharecroppers, therefore, tended to sink further and further into debt. Debtors who wished to leave the plantations were in some cases forced to remain, creating a debt peonage system backed by the local sheriff. Although the sharecroppers were no longer slaves, in a sense they were enslaved by the sharecropping system because if they tried to leave the plantation, they would be arrested for not paying their debts.

In one way, however, sharecropping was quite different from slavery: in the organization of African American families. Sharecroppers retained their ties to an extended community network, as they had under slavery. Nuclear families, however, became the dominant form of family life under the sharecropping system. At the end of the Civil War, observers described masses of black couples coming to Freedmen’s Bureau offices to legalize their marriages (Giddings 1984). And by “1870, 80 percent of black households in the Cotton Belt included a male head and his wife” (J. Jones 1985, p. 62).

The macrolevel of Southern society, the political economy, changed from a system of slavery to a system of sharecropping. In some ways this transition was not as dramatic as many had hoped when they fought for the abolition of slavery. The transition, however, was significant enough to alter the organization of most families from an extended community-based form to one that was nuclear and more male dominated.

The basic unit of labor under sharecropping was the nuclear family. Under slavery the basic unit had been the individual slave, who was often kept separated from his or her nuclear
family and could be sold away from kin at any time. As described earlier, this made it difficult and frequently impossible for people to maintain nuclear families. In contrast, nuclear families organized as economic teams with men as their head were the core of the sharecropping system.

Men sharecroppers were the ones who were in direct contact with the landholders, the creditors, and the people in the market who purchased the crops. Women were tied into the sharecropping system through their husbands. Wives and children worked in the fields under the direction of the father. When a landholder allowed a sharecropper to live on his land, he assumed that the sharecropper’s entire family would work together on the land. If landholders suspected that all family members were not working the land, they would arm themselves and ride through sharecropping communities to make sure that women and children were doing their share by working in the fields.

**Who Shall Control Women’s and Children’s Labor?** Jacqueline Jones (1985, p. 45) says that one of the great fears among whites after the Civil War was that “black people’s desire for family autonomy, as exemplified by the ‘evil of female loafers’—the preference among wives and mothers to eschew wage work in favor of attending to their own households—threatened to subvert the free labor nonslavery experiment.” The Boston cotton brokers, for example, claimed that the cotton crop of 1867–1868 was disastrous because of the decision of “growing numbers of Negro women to devote their time to their homes and children” (Giddings 1984, p. 63).

African American women in sharecropping households were far from being loafers. They did, however, attempt to control their own labor by considering the needs of their families. The women tried to divide their labor between housework and field work to allow them enough time for their families. Often they were not successful. “In 1870 more than four out of ten black married women listed jobs, almost all as field laborers. By contrast, fully 98.4 percent of white wives told the census taker they were ‘keeping house’ and had no gainful occupation” (J. Jones 1985, p. 63).

Field work was not the only work required of African American women. In the 1930s, the Commission on Race Relations interviewed African American people about their lives. A stockyard worker in Mississippi explained how women in his community were required to work for whites. He said:

Men and women had to work in the fields. A woman was not permitted to remain at home if she felt like it. If she was found at home, some of the white people would come and ask why she was not in the field and tell her she had better get to the field or else abide by the consequences. After the summer crops were all in, any of the white people could send for any Negro woman to come and do the family washing at 75 cents to $1 a day. If she sent word she could not come she had to send an excuse why she could not come. They were never allowed to stay at home as long as they were able to go. Had to take whatever they paid you for your work. (J. Jones 1985, p. 157)

From the point of view of the ex-slaves, freedom meant the opportunity to create autonomous independent families. Nearly every family that had an able-bodied man aspired to a division of labor that allowed African American women to take care of their own families, and during Reconstruction large numbers of women dropped out of the wage labor
system and limited their field work under sharecropping. “The institution of slavery had posed a constant threat to the stability of family relationships; after emancipation these relationships became solidified, though the sanctity of family life continued to come under pressure from the larger white society” (J. Jones 1985, p. 58).

Women were pressured to work in the fields and in the homes of rich white people, which limited the time they had for their own families. They were also limited by the circumstances of poverty and instability that characterized the sharecroppers’ lives. The women nevertheless tried to maintain “homelikeness” in the constantly moving households of the sharecroppers.

Sharecropping and tenant families frequently moved at the end of the year—in some cases hounded off a plantation by an unscrupulous employer, in other cases determined to seek out a better contract or sympathetic kinfolk down the road. They tacked brightly colored magazine pictures or calendars on the walls of bare, drafty cabins; fashioned embroidered curtains out of fertilizer sacks; and planted flowers in the front yard. (J. Jones 1989, p. 34)

**Gender Equality and Changes in Families under Sharecropping.** The historical documents show that the African American family was a central arena of the struggle between the old slave masters and the ex-slaves. Former slave owners wanted to continue to dominate black people by controlling their work and their family organization. Newly emancipated people wanted to control their own labor and that of their family members.

Susan Archer Mann (1986) argues that there was another struggle being waged, the one within sharecropper families between husbands and wives. The development of the nuclear man-headed household (at least as an ideal) marks a change that was not entirely positive for women. Certainly women were greatly relieved by the abolishment of slavery, and within the sharecropping system they chose to contribute as much of their labor as possible to their families. But the equality between women and men that was present under slavery was diminished when the sharecropping system developed, placing wives under the control of their husbands (Janiewski 1983). Paula Giddings (1984, p. 61) states that “following the Civil War, men attempted to vindicate their manhood largely through asserting their authority over women.”

The absorption of African American women into more nuclear households also may have pulled them away from their extrafamilial connections in the larger community, such as those Davis described as characteristic of the slave communities. Throughout the period of sharecropping and industrialization, however, African American women continued to try to keep their commitment to the larger community, especially in their efforts to develop, support, and teach in schools for black children.

Jacqueline Jones (1985, p. 99) reminds us that our concern for the loss of equality of black women in gender relations must be tempered by the acknowledgment that under sharecropping, “black working women in the South had a more equal relationship than northern middle-class white women with their husbands in the sense that the two partners were not separated by extremes of economic power or political rights; black men and women lacked both.”

She also argues that the impact of the larger political and economic context must be remembered. The maintenance of more isolated nuclear families was not for the purpose of
empowering black men. The “seclusion” of women in nuclear families in which men were the heads of the household and in direct contact with white landowners and merchants was a strategy to protect women from a real threat. One ex-slave vowed “to support his family by his own efforts; never to allow his wife and daughters to be thrown in contact with Southern white men in their homes” (Lerner 1973, p. 292). When the Union troops left and Reconstruction ended, a backlash occurred, and tremendous brutality was directed against all African American people. One of the legacies of slavery was the sexual assault of African American women by white

**Box 3.3**

Did the Abolishment of Slavery End the Involuntary Servitude of African American Children?

Just as the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment did not guarantee the right of African American families to make choices about the activities of wives and mothers, it also did not guarantee that families could make choices about their children. Rebecca Scott (1985) found that in North Carolina after the Civil War, apprenticeships were used as a way to reenslave African American children. People under the age of twenty-one could be legally indentured to employers.

For a brief period following the Civil War, from 1865 until 1877, the former Confederate states were placed under martial law, and the Union Army attempted to make sure that Southern political leaders abided by the agreements made at the end of the war. This period in American history is called Reconstruction. One of the institutions that was established during Reconstruction was the Freedmen’s Bureau, which was supposed to try to rebuild the South and to aid the 4 million former slaves. The Bureau received numerous complaints about children who were seized from their parents and taken to work on former slave owners’ plantations.

Children could be legally bound if they were “base-born” (their parents were not legally married) or if their parents “did not employ them in some honest industrious occupation.” An estimated ten thousand children were bound in Maryland, despite the objections of their parents (Giddings 1984, p. 57). “Often no money was specified to be given at the end of the term, children were bound without parental consent, no trades were specified, or children were bound beyond the legal age” (Scott 1985, p. 196).

The former slave owners fought hard to reestablish their system. For example, William Cole, a former slave owner of Rockingham, North Carolina, wrote to the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865, “I understand you are authorized to bind out to the former owners of slaves all those under the age of twenty-one years, under certain conditions,” explaining that about thirty of his former slaves were under twenty-one and that he would like them all bound to him (Scott 1985, p. 194).

African American people fought equally hard to contest the reestablishment of slavery. One ex-slave woman named Huley Tilor wrote to the North Carolina Freedmen’s Bureau about her former master:

Dear Sir if you please to do a Good Favor for me if Pleas i have been to Mr. Tilor about my children and he will not let me have them an he say he will Beat me to deth if i cross his plantasion A Gain an so i dont now what to do About it an i wish if you pleas that you wood rite Mr. Joseph tilor a letter an let him Give me my childrin Mr. cory i want my children if you Pleas to get them for me i have bin after them an he says i shall not have them and he will not Pay me nor my children ether for thar last year work and now want let me have my childrin nother an i will close huley tilor. (Scott 1985, p. 198)
men. One way to try to prevent this was to make African American husbands the social and economic link between the family and white landowners. Minimizing the contact between white men and African American women was an attempt to hold back the constant threat of sexual violence.

Sharecropping and the formation of male-headed nuclear families for African Americans who lived under the system was, therefore, a result of several intersecting factors. African American families were contested terrain. Who would control these families? White landowners or African American men? And where would African American women fit in?

**Industrialization**

Agriculture remained the core industry in the South, with cotton as the most important crop, until after World War II. But throughout the twentieth century, the introduction of machinery displaced more and more sharecroppers. Rural Southerners whose jobs were taken over by farm equipment were forced to move to the North and into the urban areas of the South.

This period in history is known as the Great Migration because it was the largest migration of people within the United States in history. Until the start of the twentieth century, nearly all African Americans lived in the Southern states. Between 1910 and 1930, one million African American people (10 percent of the total black population) moved from the South to the North (Banks 2006). And even larger numbers moved from the rural South to Southern cities during that period (Marks 1985). This migration reversed in the 1990s when more than 368,800 African Americans left the Western, Midwestern, and Northeastern states to move to the South (Vobejda 1998).

The move was not just a geographic one; it was also economic, marking a transition of the political economy of the South. This change was not just one of black workers moving from one locale to another, but of workers moving from agricultural work to urban manufacturing and service jobs. The migration occurred simultaneously with the transition of the political economy of the South from being based on farming to being based on industry and service.

The move had different results for men and women. African American men and white people moved from agricultural work into manufacturing jobs; African American women moved from agricultural work into domestic work. “Less than 3% of all black working women were engaged in manufacturing in 1900 compared with 21% of foreign-born and 38% of native-born white working women” (J. Jones 1985, p. 166).

It is difficult to say why African American women entered domestic work rather than manufacturing. The pay in manufacturing work was slightly higher than for domestic work, and factory work often meant somewhat less degrading supervision by whites compared with what the domestic worker had to endure. For these reasons black women undoubtedly would have preferred industrial jobs to domestic service. They probably did not have that choice. There is some evidence that black women were forced into domestic work by racially discriminatory laws that barred them from factory jobs.

Even African American women who did manage to secure work in the factories had a difficult time. “Black women who fled from the degradation of domestic service only to
Parents and Children in Native American Families

Throughout the periods of slavery and sharecropping, African American parents were prevented from exercising authority over their children and in many instances from even being able to live with them or spend time with them. Parents and children challenged this separation by running away to be with one another and, during Reconstruction, calling on the government to assist them in keeping their families together. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a similar battle was being waged by Native Americans.

The Revolutionary War is often thought of as one that was fought between two opposing forces seeking to control North America: the British and the Americans. A third party, Native Americans, played an equally important role. Most Native Americans fought on the side of the British, and when the war ended and the British returned home, Native Americans continued their effort to claim the right to live in their ancestral lands. Their struggle, however, was unsuccessful. The European Americans pushed westward, seeking resources and land to expand the cotton plantations (Zinn 1980).

In 1820, there were 120,000 Native Americans living east of the Mississippi River, but by 1844, fewer than 30,000 were left. This change was brought about by a government policy euphemistically called Indian Removal. Some Native American groups were forced to cede land to the U.S. government and white settlers. Those who refused were killed or run off by troops, and their property was destroyed or confiscated. Those who took refuge in the surrounding area were eventually rounded up by the army and forced to march west to states like Arkansas. Eventually they were driven even farther west to what became the reservations of Oklahoma and other Western states. Dale VanEvery (1976) described one of the marches out of Arkansas in the mid-1800s: “By midwinter, the interminable, stumbling procession of more than 15,000 Creeks stretched from border to border across Arkansas. The passage of the exiles could be distinguished from afar by the howling of trailing wolf packs and the circling flocks of buzzards” (p. 142).

Once the Native Americans were removed to the isolated reservations, around 1880, the federal government sought “to obliterate the cultural heritage of Native Americans and to replace it with the values of Anglo-American society” (Trennert 1990, p. 224). The key strategy for accomplishing this was to remove children from their tribal homes and place them in boarding schools, which were located a long distance from where their families lived. Parents were required to enroll their children for a minimum of three years, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) paid for transportation for only one round trip. During the summer most students could not afford to return home and were therefore placed in local homes to work for 50 cents to $1 a week (Littlefield 1989). Alice Littlefield reviewed student files and found that a number of parents requested that their children be sent home because of illness or economic hardship or because they believed the schools were not treating their children properly. In every case the school superintendent denied the request. Children usually did not see their parents for several years.

At the turn of the century, 17,000 Native American children were sent away to boarding schools while only 5,000 attended federal day schools (Szasz 1985). The schools were run as paramilitary institutions with students subjected to rigid discipline, beatings, highly regimented daily activities, uniforms, marching in formation, and rising to 5:00 A.M. drills. There was little emphasis on academics. Boys were likely to be trained in a trade and girls in domestic work. Each hour of academic work was matched by three hours of industrial work, most of it unpaid (Szasz 1985). Children were not allowed to speak their native languages and at some schools were punished if they were caught doing so. Although the schools were government run and therefore nondenominational, students were required to participate in service organizations sponsored by Christian churches.
find themselves in the hot, humid tobacco stemmers' room paid a high price in terms of their general health and well-being” (J. Jones 1985, p. 135).

African American women remained concentrated in domestic work for another five decades. Until the mid-1960s, the largest single occupation of African American women was domestic work. “By 1950, 60 percent of all African American working women (compared to 16 percent of all white working women) were concentrated in institutional and private household service jobs” (J. Jones 1985, p. 235).

African American families changed as women went to work in the homes of white people and spent long hours away from their own families. Some employers insisted that their maids “live in,” which meant that domestic workers were able to see their own families only every other weekend. Once again, an African American woman’s time with her own family was a battleground between herself and her white employer.

A similar battle was being waged in California during this same period. Japanese American women and men who had also immigrated from rural agricultural economies to the growing U.S. urban centers found themselves limited in their occupational choices. Large numbers of Japanese American women and men became live-in domestic employees for whites. They also would have preferred factory or shop employment, but like African Americans were barred from those jobs by race and gender discrimination.

Being on call twenty-four hours a day by an employer was intolerable for African Americans and Japanese Americans, and both fought against live-in domestic service. African Americans resisted and defied their employers more openly than Japanese Americans, although both groups used a number of resistance strategies (Glenn 1990).

Bonnie Thornton Dill interviewed domestic workers who had been employed in the first half of the twentieth century. She found that they used several techniques to gain control of their work, including direct confrontation, threatening to quit, chicanery, and actually quitting (Dill 1988). Although they were not all successful, many were able to work out some degree of autonomy and gain some respect on their jobs. Ultimately, they were successful in changing domestic work from live-in to day work, which meant they could go to their own homes at night (Dill 1988; Glenn 1990).

In Chapter 7 we continue this investigation of domestic work by African American women, as well as women from other racial ethnic groups. The important points to be remembered here are, first, that private domestic work was overwhelmingly the largest occupation for African American women in the early part of the twentieth century and, second, that work involved conflicts between maids and their employers over a maid’s right to spend time with her own family.
African American Families in the Struggle for Equality

Although each of these historical periods shows different political economies and different family forms, one theme runs through them all: the centrality of family in the battle waged by African Americans for equality. Jacqueline Jones (1985, p. 4) states, “Throughout American history, the black family has been the focus of a struggle between black women and the whites who sought to profit from their labor.”

During the slave period, the goal of slave owners was to use their slaves to make as much profit as possible. Slaves had very different goals. They fought to maintain their family ties, to keep their community alive, and to topple the slave system. Central issues of contention between slaveholder and slave were related to family organization, such as the right of slaves to choose a spouse, to legally marry, to live with their spouses and children, and to be free from sexual assault by plantation owners. Despite enormous difficulty, slaves often kept track of their kin and created their own rituals to recognize marriage and parenthood, regardless of the slave owners’ laws.

Slaves also organized insurrections and other forms of rebellion, such as running away from the plantations. In the opening scenario, John mentions that he has decided to go north with Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a large international network of black and white people who smuggled thousands of slaves out of the South before the Civil War.

Harriet Tubman was a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. She was born into slavery, and after escaping she returned to the South, first to bring her husband and other family members to freedom and then to make nineteen more trips carrying more than 300 slaves to freedom. Harriet Tubman was not alone. More than 3,200 people ran the Underground Railroad, transporting 2,500 slaves a year to freedom between 1830 and 1860 (Zinn 1980).

During sharecropping, the battle over African American families continued. Landowners physically threatened women who did not work in the fields and kidnapped children to be field workers. Sharecropper families fought back by defying the landowners and often the sheriff in attempts to run away or at least to maintain some control over their lives. Sharecropper women tried to spend as much time as they could on their family work, and parents sought to retain their rights to protect their children and make decisions about when and where they would work. Sharecropper men attempted to seclude women and children away from whites to protect them from sexual assault.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Great Migration and industrialization pulled Southerners from the rural areas into the cities. African American women who were pushed into wage labor as maids fought with their white mistresses over the time they could spend with their own families and over control of their work. Employers ignored maids’ family connections and obligations, demanding that they be on call twenty-four hours a day. Maids had to defy their employers to claim even a small part of their lives for their families and themselves. Eventually the maids’ protests spilled into the streets in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which is discussed below.

During Reconstruction, an attempt was made to integrate African Americans into Southern society. African American men were allowed to vote, and many African Americans
were appointed or elected to government positions. For example, in South Carolina in the years immediately following the Civil War, fifty members of the state legislature were black and only thirteen were white. But as the old plantation owners regained political power, the situation deteriorated. In 1883, the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was declared unconstitutional. In 1896, the final blow occurred with the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. From the end of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, Jim Crow laws created a legal apartheid in the southern United States.

Homer Plessy, a black man, rode a segregated train through Louisiana and was required to sit in a car reserved for African Americans. He sued the railroad, claiming that his constitutional rights had been violated. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the railroad, making legal the doctrine of “separate but equal” or what were called Jim Crow laws. An apartheid system was established with the doctrine of separate but equal, which meant that all public facilities in the South, including restaurants, drinking fountains, public restrooms, schools, blood banks, and public transportation, must be segregated.

Black people who rode the bus were required to pay at the front of the bus, then get off, walk to the back door, and get on in the back of the bus. They were allowed to sit only in the seats in the back of the bus even if there were empty seats in the front section, which was “for whites only.” If a white person got on and there were no “white seats” left, a black person was required to give up his or her seat. One evening in 1955, Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give up her seat. She was arrested and placed in jail. Her action sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was to become a major event in the history of the civil rights movement. Many of the riders on the city buses were African American maids who rode to work at white homes across town. The maids and other African Americans boycotted the buses for many months and eventually were successful in changing the Jim Crow laws affecting public transportation.

When we examine diversity among contemporary American families in Chapter 5, we will continue the discussion of the history of African Americans and the relationship between changes in the macrolevel of social context and changes in the microlevel of families’ everyday experiences. More than half of all African Americans now live outside the South, and most of them live in urban areas. As noted in Table 2.3 in the last chapter, black women have continued to increase their numbers in the paid labor force. Along with these changes in the context of African American families, the organization of those families has also changed. Table 3.2 shows, for example, that a growing number of African American households are headed by single parents, especially single women. As we moved into the fourth period of African American family history, the organization of the African American family continued to be controversial. These issues are examined in Chapter 5.

### TABLE 3.2 Recent Changes in Black Family Organization, 1970–2007

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<td>Married couples</td>
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<td>55.5</td>
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<td>Single male-headed</td>
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<td>9.3</td>
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<td>40.3</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43.7</td>
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*Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1990a, 2000e, 2003b, 2007).*
Latino American Family History

In Chapter 5, we sort out the question of who exactly are Latino Americans. This broad group includes people from many different nations and cultures. The largest category of Latino Americans are Mexican Americans, or Chicanos. This section looks at some of the history of Mexico and Mexican Americans and the ways that history shaped family life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sometimes the debate around immigrants and borders in the United States sounds as if Northern Europeans settled in North America establishing the nation called the United States, and Spanish-speaking people from nations south of the border have been trying to get in ever since. This image of American history is a myth. About one-third of the area that is currently the United States was originally settled by Spanish colonists and then later became part of Mexico. In 1847, the American military invaded northern Mexico. When the war ended in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, allowing the United States to purchase for $15 million the area we now know as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, and Colorado. The people who lived in those areas (about half of Mexico) suddenly found themselves living in a new nation; and they found that family and friends on the other side of the new border were no longer fellow citizens (Acuna 2003).

Split Households among Chicanos and Chinese Americans

In Chapter 2 we explored the historical development of the relationship between work and family for working-class and middle-class European Americans. The dominant ideology romanticized the split between work and family, while making it inaccessible to working-class European American families because of low wages. For middle-class European Americans, the split between work and family was an important part of their history and has created problems, especially for women. In this chapter the history of African American families reveals the opposite occurring, the blurring of the lines between work and family and women’s and men’s work.

Two other groups of Americans experienced a sharp split between work and family and between the work that men and women engaged in. Both Chicanos (Mexican Americans) and Chinese Americans were required to divide their households for the men to be allowed to work (Glenn 1991).

Chicano Families. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chicano men were recruited to work in mining camps and on railroad gangs, which did not provide accommodations for wives and children and usually prohibited them from being there (Barerra 1979). The men were required to leave their families for long periods of time in order to earn a living. The women who were left behind worked in subsistence farming and wage labor in urban areas. They had jobs as cooks, maids, and laundry workers in hotels and other public establishments (Camarillo 1979; Garcia 1980). In addition to these tasks, Chicanas—Mexican American women—also raised their children and provided health care in communities that often had no running water or public sanitation systems.

After the start of the twentieth century, the split between work and family and women’s and men’s work began to decline as growers increasingly hired entire Chicano families to work as farm laborers in the large fields of the Southwest. For many Chicanos, the split
between work and family disappeared as husbands, wives, and even small children and infants went to work in the fields. While these changes may have improved family life by allowing family members more contact with one another, living conditions were no better. Infant and child mortality was high, wages were low, education was nonexistent, and life expectancy was short (Glenn 1991).

Today many Latino families still work together in the fields, but many other Latino families remain split. Latina women who come to the United States to work as domestic workers or nannies often must leave behind their own children. More and more women from Mexico, Honduras, Ecuador, and other Latin American countries are crossing the border as demand for their labor grows. The global trend is not new, but in Mexico and other parts of Latin America the growing numbers of mothers migrating for work without their children is leaving hundreds of families without parents. The United Nations estimates that 85 million women in the world migrated in search of work in 2000 (United Nations 2005). Researchers studying the trend say it takes a heavy toll on the emotional well-being of these migrant mothers as well as that of their children (Bhatia and Braine 2005).

**Chinese American Families.** Among Chinese workers the split was more formalized. A significant number of Chinese immigrants arrived in the western United States and Hawaii during the 1800s. Chinese people were the first Asians to immigrate to the United States in significant numbers (Wong 1995). By the end of the century, Chinese people constituted 25 percent of the entire workforce in California (Takaki 1989). Nearly all these immigrants were men (Jeong and You 2008). Because the United States was known as Gold Mountain, the wives who were left behind were called Gold Mountain Ladies. About one-half of the Chinese men who immigrated left wives in China (Chow 1998).

There are several reasons for this (Chow 1998). First, only male workers were offered jobs, and when the men were recruited, it was with the specification that their wives and children must be left behind. Second, the men’s families in China may have encouraged them to leave their wives and children behind, believing that this would increase the probability that the men would remain in contact with their relatives in China and especially that they would continue to send money home.

A third factor influencing the number of Chinese women entering the United States was immigration law. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese women from entering the country even if they had husbands waiting for them. The purpose of the act was to prevent the Chinese from settling permanently after their labor was no longer needed for such major projects as building the railways (Glenn 1991). The law prohibited Chinese women from entering the United States so they would not bear children who could claim U.S. citizenship (Espiritu 1997).

Fourth, Chinese people were afraid to raise families and make their homes in the United States because of racial harassment and attacks against them (R. Daniels 1978). “From Los Angeles to Seattle and as far east as Denver and Rock Springs, Wyoming, Chinese were run out of town or beaten and killed by mobs whose members were almost never brought to justice” (Kitano and Daniels 1988, p. 22). Because of these four factors, very few Chinese women lived in the United States during the nineteenth century, and as late as 1930, the ratio of Chinese men to women was still 11:2 (Glenn 1991).
Little is known about the wives and children who were left behind in China. Their numbers, however, were significant, since about half the men who came to work in the United States were married. Many of these women never saw their husbands again. Some men were able to visit China twenty or thirty years later. Most of the wives lived with their husbands’ parents, where their behavior, especially their sexual behavior, was carefully monitored. Although the women rarely saw their husbands, the marriage contract held a tight rein on their lives (Glenn 1991).

Chicanos, Chinese Americans, working-class European Americans, and middle-class European Americans were living in the same developing industrial capitalist economy in the United States. But they all experienced a different history of changing relationships between the organization of work and family and between men’s work and women’s work. Each of these groups also faced problems as a result of the way in which families and work were organized throughout this period. Those problems, however, differed significantly (Dill 1986). The division of labor for African American slaves presents yet another pattern.

In Chapter 2 we noted that in the nuclear families of middle-class whites in the nineteenth century, work was divided into two spheres—paid work in the labor market for men and unpaid domestic work for women. Work and family were separate, and men’s work and women’s work was different. In Chinese American and Mexican American families, work and family and men’s work and women’s work were also separate. Under the slave system, both African American men and women labored at the same exhausting jobs for no pay. The lines between work and family and between women’s work and men’s work were blurred in the African American family under slavery (Dill 1986; Matthaei 1982).

Based on the experience of white middle-class women, a conceptualization of a split between work and family has been developed. This conceptualization is especially inconsistent with the experience of African Americans (Brewer 1988). Rather than attempting to explain why African American families “deviate” from this “norm,” Collins (1990) suggests that we reconstruct our thinking about families based on our discovery of these kinds of diversity. The different relationship between work and family and men’s and women’s work, in particular, helps us see how useless definitions of the Family are. Family has many meanings depending on the social context in which a family exists.

The discovery of the contrasts in the experience of separate spheres among European Americans, African Americans, Chinese Americans, and Mexican Americans teaches us a second lesson—that diversity is not just between whites and nonwhites. Diversity occurs across many lines, and we should not speak of people of color as if they were a monolithic group. Nor can we describe all families as always the same within any particular racial ethnic group. Not all Latino families lived in split families, for example.

**Salt of the Earth**

In the early part of the twentieth century, many Latinos lived in mining communities in the Southwest where whole families settled around the mines where men were employed. In the 1950s an important strike, which was documented in a film titled *Salt of the Earth*, took place at a zinc mine in New Mexico. Fourteen hundred men from the IUMMSW (International Union of Mill Mine and Smelter Workers) walked out in protest of conditions of work at the mine. The courts ruled that the union members could not maintain a picket line at the company gates. At
first the union did not know how to respond since their inability to picket greatly reduced the pressure they could put on management in their negotiations, and the miners would not be able to prevent the company from hiring nonunion replacements (scabs). The miners, however, came up with an innovative plan. The women in the community would “man” the picket line. Since the women were not members of the union, the court could not restrict them from marching. Every day the women marched with their signs (Acuna 2003; Wilson 1977).

Their action was hailed as a heroic act in defense of the men of the community. As time passed, however, the women’s activities began to alter relations in families in a way that challenged the old ideas and old ways of organizing family life that kept women subordinate to their husbands. Because the women were busy at the picket line, the men had to take over the household chores that had been women’s work. The men discovered that the work the women did was difficult and time-consuming and that some of the work was made unnecessarily arduous because it was seen as unimportant. The men had heard their wives complain for years about the lack of a plumbing system into the community, which meant they had to carry water to do their household chores. This problem, however, had not been seen as important enough to include in contract negotiations with the mine owners. But when carrying water became men’s work, it was brought to the table as a critical issue in the contracts. By the time the strike had ended, women had gained respect in their community for taking over the men’s action. In addition, the household work that had been women’s work also gained respect and was recognized as a critical part of the total workload of the community and therefore suitable for consideration in labor negotiations (Wilson 1977).

In the discussion earlier in this chapter on domestic work done by African American women who were slaves for the slave community and especially for people attempting to walk to freedom through the Underground Railroad, we observed that domestic work became transformed into a revolutionary activity. This was in contrast to the housework done by white women, which was a sign of their subordination. In the case of the Chicanas in the zinc strike, housework also was transformed. In this case it was invisible and not given much respect when work was divided between men who worked for wages in the mine and women who worked at home. But when the work began to be done by men while the women were “on strike,” doing laundry, carrying water, and washing dishes emerged as important political issues and became part of the negotiations of the miners’ union.

Structuration Theory and the Importance of Agency

Chapter 1 discussed C. Wright Mills’s notion of the Sociological Imagination and the importance of acknowledging both the way in which the larger social context affects our everyday experiences and interactions and the way in which day-to-day social activities help shape the larger social context. The interplay between the micro- and macrolevels of society has continued to be of interest to social theorists. Anthony Giddens (1984) worked to develop sociological theory around the question of the relationship between the micro- and macrolevels of society. He has been especially intent on drawing our attention to the microlevel social activities that influence the macrolevel. He refers to this activity as agency (Ritzer 1992). Giddens writes, “Agency concerns events of which an individual is a perpetrator. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened” (p. 9).
Giddens was influenced by Marxism, and his work has grown from Karl Marx’s observation that “men make history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (K. Marx 1869/1963, p. 15). Giddens’s concept of agency fits the first clause of the sentence “men make history” (Ritzer 1992). He argues that people have agency; they act on their surroundings. He refers to the surroundings on which they act as social structure, and he asserts that social structure can be divided into four clusters: symbolic orders, political institutions, economic institutions, and laws.

1. Symbolic orders can refer to ideas, images, and words we use to think about and communicate about humans and their interactions. For example, during slavery, an important aspect of the maintenance of the system was ideas among slaveholders that slaves were less than human and therefore had less feelings and need for family. These same kinds of ideas rationalized the laws that brought Chinese American and Latino men to work while forcing them to leave their families behind.

2. Political institutions include the government and the police, any organizations that serve to maintain or alter relationships of power. Political institutions encompass written and unwritten rules about how people should conduct their affairs. They also include physical structures like the White House and the Pentagon. The sheriffs’ departments that restricted sharecroppers from leaving the plantation communities and the court that blocked the miners from picketing in the zinc mine strike are examples of political institutions. The military decision to invade Mexico in order to claim the land we now know as California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas are also examples of actions taken by political institutions.

3. Economic institutions include the slave market, the sharecropping plantation, and the race- and gender-segregated labor market of industrialization. These economic institutions created an important part of the social-structural context of African American family history. They also include the unions that negotiated contracts for the zinc miners.

4. Laws that made slavery and Jim Crow legal played an essential role in this history. During slavery, laws that restricted African Americans’ rights to marry and prohibited parents from living with their children were especially important. During the period of sharecropping and industrialization, laws that did not allow workers to choose whom they would work for and what hours they would work were important to family life. Immigration laws restricted Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans from deciding about their work and family life.

This chapter’s review of American history provides evidence of the importance of structure in the description of the dominant systems within each historical period that set the conditions under which African Americans and others lived. It also shows evidence of agency in the efforts of African Americans and others to alter, abolish, or maintain these social structures. African Americans fought against slavery and Jim Crow laws; Native Americans struggled to reclaim their children from the federal government; and Latino Americans went on strike to improve their working conditions. Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory helps us see these two levels, structure and agency, and the constant interplay between them.
The Micro–Macro Connection

We see from this history that the macrolevel of social organization makes an enormous difference to family organization and family life. The division of labor between women and men, the political relationship between women and men, and even the reproduction of children are greatly affected by the kind of political economy in which those relationships are embedded. The startling and alien quality of the slave system provides powerful evidence of the importance of understanding the macrolevel of society, the social context, in order to understand the organization of families and the everyday experiences of family members. We would never make the mistake of saying that John and Mary, from the story at the beginning of the chapter, chose their family life without acknowledging the limitations placed on those “choices” by the slave system. Although our own society is not as grotesque as the slave society, it is equally powerful in its effect on individual lives. When we try to understand our own families, we commonly assume our social context to be something natural or inevitable, and we believe that we make free and individual choices. This history of African American families helps us see that our social surroundings profoundly affect and sometimes even determine what our lives will be like.

Once again we observe that society and families have not remained the same throughout history. The macrolevel of society is not static, but changes sometimes slowly and sometimes dramatically. The history of African Americans shows both the steady evolution and dramatic turning points of the last two centuries. It is not unusual to hear people in contemporary American society speak of “the downfall of the family,” as if families had remained unchanged for centuries and have only recently deviated from some fixed form. But the Johns and Marys of the slave period led very different lives from the Johns and Marys of the sharecropping period and the Great Migration. This history, like that in Chapter 2, reminds us that change is a constant factor and that families have always been in transition.

We also see how historical change was experienced differently by African Americans compared with white, Mexican, and Chinese Americans. This suggests that when we speak of families, we must be careful to remember that families vary by race ethnicity, class, region, nation, and many other factors. These variations form stratification systems that are part of the macrolevel of society and that create significant differences in the microlevel experiences of members of various strata. In the next two chapters, we develop this discussion of stratification and the way in which it affects family life.

The two chapters on history show the ties between gender, family, and political economy. Social contexts are made of many factors and even systems of factors. Social structure itself is complex. The history of a society is really made up of many histories of many social structures.

In this history of African American society, we see that systems—family, gender, race, and political economy—make up part of the macrolevel of social structure and that these systems are interrelated. As families vary according to their social context, so do gender relations and family organization. The relative power of women and men, the tasks assigned to women and men, and the importance attached to those tasks all differ according to the time, place, and racial ethnic group in which they occur.
This chapter has described the day-to-day experience of African Americans at the microlevel. It has also described the social organization of slavery, sharecropping, migration, and industrialization at the macrolevel. And it has shown how this macro-organization affected the everyday life of African American people.

The relationship between macro- and microlevel forces is not one way. This chapter also shows the effect of the micro on the macro, of individuals working together to change the system, whether in slave insurrections, in the struggle over black families, or in the fight for equality for African Americans, Latino Americans, and for women.