Ethnicity and Race

A discussion on ethnicity in the workforce cannot begin without a definition of ethnicity and how it differs from race. Kottak (2006) explains that **ethnicity** is "based on cultural similarities among members of the same ethnic group and the differences between that group and others" (p. 290).

Ethnic groups are identified in relation to the dominant culture. National origin and distinctive cultural patterns encompassing language, religious faith, shared traditions, values, symbols, and literature, music, and food habits are some of the distinctive characteristics that set groups apart. There are distinctions between ethnic groups expressed in language, religion, race, kinship, and geographical isolation. "Ethnicity is revealed when people claim a certain identity for themselves and are defined by others as having that identity" (Kottak, 2006, p. 290). Ethnicity is an expression of attachment to a group and its associated behaviors, which vary in intensity. Richard Jenkins (2007) points out that it is not only indicative of a collective identity, but that it matters greatly to the members of the ethnic group. Ethnicity is personal identity. And, although self-definition is important, it's not the only salient component of identity. It is argued that there

is no such thing as "unilateral ethnicity," but a construct influenced by ethnic relations or the connections and contacts between those groups of people who appear to be the same with others who appear to be different. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that all people within any particular group are exactly the same as another. In other words, apparent cultural similarities do not influence ethnicity within group differentiation.

Jenkins further suggests that

> . . . ethnicity is not a matter of definable degrees or obvious kinds of cultural similarity or difference. There is no checklist with which to determine whether or not members of Group A are really ethnically different to members of Group B, or whether Group C is an ethnic group or some other kind of collectivity. Enumerating cultural traits or characteristics is not a useful way to understand or identify ethnic differences. Human beings are distinguished by their voices, and the baseline is always whether a group is seen by its members to be different. (p. 2)

Race, on the other hand, is a cultural category and not a biological category. Kottak (2006) suggests that "[o]nly cultural constructions of race are possible—even though the average person conceptualizes 'race' in biological terms" (p. 293). There is no scientific classification of race based on common genes (Kottak, 2006). In the United States, race is often confused with ethnicity because of a lack of a clear distinction between the two. Kottak gives the example of how in the United States, the term *Hispanic* "is an ethnic category that cross-cuts racial contrasts between black and white" (p. 293). In other words, a person who is Hispanic can be perceived as white or black depending on the hue of their skin tone. Race is also political. In the United States, **racial classification** "involves access to resources, including jobs, voting districts, and federal funding of programs aimed at minorities" (p. 296). This classification **ascribes status** onto people based on their perceived ethnic group affiliation. People of **mixed race** (e.g., Black and White) experience **hypodescent**, which automatically places them into the minority group regardless of physical appearance.