CHAPTER 11

Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Joohwan Park, a young advertising executive at a Korean company, traveled to Chicago on a business trip from Seoul, South Korea. Park knew that he would be in the Chicago area for only a short time and that he would be interacting primarily with other team members from his company. So he was pleased when his supervisor told him that Bill Young, an advertising representative at the Chicago office, had volunteered to show him around Chicago on the Saturday before he returned to Seoul. Park was looking forward to meeting an American, practicing his English, and learning more about American culture.

When Park met Young in the hotel lobby on Saturday morning, he was surprised to see a Korean face. Young told Park that he was Korean American; his parents had moved to the United States from Korea before he was born. Though glad to have Young's companionship, Park was also somewhat disappointed. He had hoped to meet a "real" American—someone more like the European Americans he had seen in television programs and movies.

A Word about Terms

Some scientists argue that race is not a scientifically valid notion. The differences commonly ascribed to race, they say, are in fact results of social consensus rather than objective, measurable fact. This chapter uses the term *race* anyway, because Americans commonly use it to refer to people with different physical characteristics, notably color of skin, type of hair, and shape of eyes, nose, and lips.

This chapter uses the term *ethnic* to refer to differences associated not with physical characteristics but with values and customs. Mexicans, for example, may appear to be of the same race as many Caribbean Islanders, but they have their own version of the Spanish language and their own cuisines, holidays, music, and so on. For purposes of this chapter, these are *ethnic differences*.

WHAT INTERNATIONAL VISITORS SEE

The racial and ethnic diversity that international visitors experience in the United States depends very much on the part or parts of the country they visit. According to the 2008 and 2009 estimates from the U.S. Census, people of European ancestry make up approximately 66 percent of the U.S. population. Such people are commonly referred to as *white* or *Caucasian*. Despite the increasing diversity that is discussed here, then, most of the people in the U.S. are white. In some parts of the U.S., particularly the middle of the country and the northern reaches of New England, nearly everyone is white. For example, Maine's population is 96 percent white; Iowa's 94 percent; Nebraska's and North Dakota's, 91 percent. Although the situation is changing, corporate boards of directors, evening television programs on major networks, lists of wealthy people, and governmental bodies at virtually all levels are dominated by European American people, usually males.

Hispanic Americans, who trace their ancestry to Mexico, Central and South America, Spain, and Portugal, constitute approximately 15 percent of the American population, but that percentage is climbing rapidly.

Blacks and African Americans, whose ancestors come mainly from central and southern Africa, make up about 13 percent of the population. Asians, including Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, are about 5 percent, and Native Americans, once the proud nations that spanned the continent, constitute less than 1 percent. The remaining 2 percent identify themselves as "mixed race" or of some other ancestry.

Such culturally and racially diverse people are not randomly distributed around the country, however. For example, people visiting the West Coast, including the states of Washington, Oregon, and California, will notice the strong influence of East Asian culture in cuisine and the arts. Residents in large cities such as San Francisco shop in open-air markets offering produce and specialty items from many parts of Asia.

It is no accident that the first major-league baseball teams to give prominent roles to Japanese and Korean players were those representing the West Coast cities of Los Angeles and Seattle.

Visitors to southwestern states such as Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas will experience the many ways in which Latino, most prominently Mexican, culture has influenced the region. Mexican food is very popular, and regional varieties have developed in different parts of the Southwest. Mexican music (or Tejano music, as it is called in Texas) is also popular, especially in the border region, and Mexican holidays such as Cinco de Mayo (May 5), which recognizes a Mexican military victory over France in 1862, are widely celebrated.

In southern states such as Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia, the black and African American influence is particularly noticeable. In fact African American culture has had a strong, if often unremarked, influence on mainstream American culture for a very long time. For example, many foreigners (and many Americans, for that matter) are surprised to learn that most of the styles of music that are considered in other parts of the world to be "typically American," such as jazz, blues, rock 'n roll, rap, and hip-hop, originated in the African American community.

In the Midwest, where the influence of other ethnic groups might not be as pervasive as it is along the coasts, the presence of such groups cannot be overlooked. Detroit has a large population of Arab Americans. Minneapolis is home to more Hmong refugees than any other American city and also to

thousands of refugees from Somalia. Many small midwestern towns that have meat-packing plants are home to noticeable numbers of Hispanics, Somalis, or other ethnic groups.

Finally, the East Coast is known for its many different cultures, particularly in large cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Visitors frequently remark that it is almost impossible to find a native-born American driving any of the thousands of taxicabs that serve Washington, D.C. or New York.

Joohwan Park and Bill Young spent the day touring Chicago and talking together. Young pointed out several of the city's ethnic neighborhoods. Like many large U.S. cities, Chicago has a Chinatown. There is also a Greektown, a Little Italy, an Indiatown, and a Ukrainian Village. Mexicans constitute the largest of Chicago's ethnic populations; Poles are the second largest. There are also concentrations of people from Vietnam, Thailand, Russia, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. Park saw cafes and other businesses with signs in assorted languages that he did not recognize. He also noticed that most of the ethnic neighborhoods were in poorer-looking parts of town, with buildings in obvious need of paint and repairs and streets in need of attention.

Young explained that people from many countries had come to the Chicago area over the years, often from economically poor backgrounds. They tended to settle in proximity to each other and to establish businesses that catered to the tastes of people "from home." Those who did well economically sometimes left these neighborhoods and moved to other parts of town where the housing was more attractive and where the neighborhood lacked or had already lost a particular ethnic identity. Young and his wife lived in such an area.

Some parts of Chicago, Young told Park, were considered too dangerous to pass through, even in daylight. They were usually dominated by one or another nonwhite group, he said, and were home to many young, unemployed males, gang members, drug dealers

and users, and others considered to be potentially violent. Unlike Chinatown or Greektown, Young explained, the parts of a city dominated by black or Hispanic people do not usually have names that clearly reflect their ethnic character. Instead, their names often reflect their location or some topographic or historical feature. Examples include Cabrini Green (Chicago), The Hill District (Pittsburgh), Five Points (Denver), or simply the West Side or the East Side (many cities).

From their conversation, Park learned that Young's wife was also a Korean American, as were most of the people with whom Young and his wife socialized. Despite all of America's ethnic diversity, it seemed to Park that the amount of interaction among members of different groups was limited. Young described incidents in which he and his wife had encountered racial prejudice and stereotypes and reported that European Americans often asked him and his wife if they were Chinese. Many appeared to have one image of people from East Asia, labeled "Chinese" or "Orientals," Young said, and they seemed not to know that Koreans, Japanese, Malays, Thais, and Chinese represent different ethnic groups, languages, religions, and cultures. Some even spoke to Young and his wife in a sort of baby talk, apparently assuming that they could not speak English (their native language) very well.

Young's own boss had thought Young would be best qualified to host Park, not realizing that Young had never been to Korea, barely remembered the language his parents had spoken when he was a child, and ate Korean food (except kimchi, a ubiquitous Korean dish) only on special occasions.

Park realized that Young held his own stereotypes about groups different from his. His distrust of and dislike for black Americans was evident from his tone when he talked about them during the tour of Chicago. Since Park had already understood from news reports in Korea that animosity between blacks and Koreans in large American cities was common, he was not surprised by Young's words.

Had Park stayed longer in the United States, he might have learned that members of American minority groups are far from constituting a single community. Prejudice and stereotypes are as common within and among minority groups as they are between the majority of European Americans and members of other groups. Lighter-skinned blacks versus darker-skinned blacks, blacks versus "browns" (as Hispanics are sometimes called), Cubans versus Puerto Ricans versus Mexicans, Hindus from India versus Sikhs from India, Vietnamese with higher education versus Vietnamese with little or no formal education—these are but a few of the divisions within and among groups of "people of color" in the United States.

Like many international visitors, Joohwan Park had arrived with an image of the people of the United States that was in some ways quite different from the reality. Although the U.S. has often been called a "melting pot" (or, more recently, a "salad bowl," a "mosaic," or a "stir-fry") of many different cultural and religious groups, the dominant image of the U.S. portrayed by media is that of a relatively homogeneous society. The "typical" American is often portrayed as young, European American, and middle class. And, as stated in the Introduction, the predominant values and ideas that have historically shaped American culture have been those of the European American, Protestant male. Although racial and ethnic minorities have long played a role in shaping American society, their cultural values have not always been recognized or valued. Their influence on mainstream U.S. culture has grown considerably over the past few decades, however, and continues to increase, even as the second or third generations of immigrant families typically become assimilated into the mainstream culture. They learn English better than they learn their parents' or grandparents' language; their command of their parents' native language is limited; they adopt the clothing styles, interests, and customs of the dominant culture. (The resulting intergenerational conflicts provide material for many popular books and movies.)

Many foreign students, businesspeople, and visitors remark on the racial and ethnic diversity they observe, not only in large cities but increasingly in smaller towns as well. And, like Joohwan Park, they may also see indications of a rather stratified society, with different minority groups concentrated in particular geographic areas and with darker-skinned people more often

occupying lower-level positions while lighter-skinned people enjoy more prestigious and better-paying ones. It is evident that the United States is not only a racially and ethnically diverse society but a nation divided by class as well.

HOW AMERICANS VIEW RACE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

Of course, the way Americans think about race and ethnic relationships is deeply influenced by their cultural assumptions and values. Generally, European Americans view the topic through the lens of individualism. People of color, though, may view it through a lens of collectivism, seeing themselves as a group with shared characteristics and concerns. Both European Americans and people of color, Americans all, are likely to seek numerical data to help them understand the topic and to support their opinions about it.

American newspapers and magazines sometimes draw on the results of public-opinion surveys when they report on the state of race relations in the country. These surveys seem to represent an effort to discover the "truth" about race relations by determining what portion of the population holds this or that opinion on the matter. If a survey finds that 55 percent of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that "conditions for nonwhites in the United States have improved significantly in the past ten years," many Americans take this to mean that the conditions have in fact improved.

Governmental and nonprofit agencies seeking to understand race relations are likely to do studies, collecting statistical information on a wide array of topics. Some examples:

- the percentage of black males aged 21 to 25 who are unemployed, as compared with the unemployment rate among European Americans in the same age range
- the average college-entrance examination scores of members of different racial or ethnic groups

- the frequency with which various diseases (such as AIDS, tuberculosis, and diabetes) occur among blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans in a certain age range compared with the frequency among European Americans in the same age group
- the rate at which members of different nonwhite groups drop out of secondary school compared with the dropout rate of European Americans
- the rates at which young people in various racial or ethnic groups complete secondary school, enter a college or university, graduate from a college or university, undertake graduate-level studies, or earn advanced degrees
- the portion of managers or executives in a business who are not European American
- the frequency with which unmarried teenage girls in various racial or ethnic groups become pregnant
- the frequency with which people of color appear in television programs broadcast during weekday evenings and the nature of the roles they play
- the per capita income of individuals in various groups
- the net worth of families in various groups
- the frequency with which police stop nonwhite versus European American motorists
- the disparate effects of economic hard times on European Americans versus other groups

Two often incompatible conclusions appear to emerge from all these surveys and studies. On the one hand, some people conclude that race relations in the United States are indeed improving. They cite statistics showing (they say) improved health, higher levels of educational attainment, and improved incomes, especially among blacks. They point to the increased presence of people of color in the media. They cite individuals such as the late Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan, who are among the best-known Americans in the world. And of course they cite the case of Barack Obama, the black man elected to the U.S. presidency in 2008. With his election, many people thought, the issue of racism in America had passed

a historic threshold. Americans, some commentators said, had shown that they were past the point of responding only to a person's race—that they could consider, as the civil rights leader Martin Luther King famously said, the "content of their character."

On the other hand, there are those, more often nonwhite than European American, who believe that Americans of color continue to suffer huge disadvantages. Such critics cite studies showing (they say) that nonwhites often earn lower incomes, have less wealth, live in lower-quality housing, suffer more often from more illnesses, fail to enter or complete school, and so on. They point to the portion of black males who are underemployed, unemployed, or, worse, in prison—or dead at an early age.

In a forum on inequality in the United States, sociologist Orlando Patterson explains these apparently contradictory viewpoints this way:

> The civil rights movement . . . succeeded wonderfully in the public sphere of American life. From being virtual outcasts in nearly every area of public life as late as the 1950s, black Americans are now an integral part of the political, cultural and civic fabric. They are a critical component of one of the nation's major political parties; they are fully integrated into the military . . . ; they exercise disproportionate influence in popular culture—in music, sports, theater, dance, film, and TV—and they have been incorporated into elite public and corporate positions to a degree unparalleled in any other white-majority nation in the world . . . .
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> However, accompanying this historic public achievement has been a stunning failure: the persisting exclusion of blacks from the private sphere of American life. Outside elite circles, blacks are as segregated today from the private domain of white lives—their neighborhoods, schools, churches, clubs and other associations, friendship networks, marriage markets and families—as they were fifty years ago. (2010, 21)

Americans, or at least European Americans, are so influenced by the value of individualism that they often have trouble seeing the race-relations situation in terms of groups in the way Professor Patterson does. If Barack Obama can succeed in life (which means, for many Americans, becoming rich and famous or achieving high office), then so can other individuals. Look how hard Obama worked to overcome his humble background. See

how intelligent he is, how well he has learned to express himself and to present himself to the public. Other nonwhites could succeed too, according to this view, if they just worked hard enough and behaved appropriately.

Yet Obama's election did not seem to move America past its race-relations troubles. Authorities reported an unprecedented number of assassination threats aimed at the black president; hate crimes aimed at blacks increased, while those targeting other minority groups declined. Seemingly invigorated right-wing extremists challenged Obama's patriotism and even the legitimacy of his presidency. Sales of guns and ammunition increased dramatically after his election victory. Public-opinion surveys taken well after Obama assumed office showed far more blacks than others approving of his performance.

Whether one takes the view that things are getting better or worse, it is certainly the case that the United States still faces major issues regarding the relationship between the traditional European American population and people with other backgrounds. Even the language used to discuss the topic is open to emotional debate. For example, by the year 1970 it was no longer acceptable to refer to someone with African ancestry as *colored*, which had long been considered a polite term. *Colored* was supplanted by *Negro*, which in turn gave way to *black* (sometimes capitalized, sometimes not) and then, at least in some circles, to *African American*. (The word *nigger* is virtually always considered highly insulting and degrading—unless used among African Americans themselves. International visitors will certainly want to avoid the word entirely—as they will words that convey disrespect for members of other ethnic or cultural groups.)

Indeed, the matter of terminology regarding non–European American groups became so sensitive that, around 2010, some well-known media personalities were forced to retire after using "racial slurs" or other demeaning language in public settings. In private, international visitors may well hear U.S. Americans using racial slurs or other derisive language when talking about racial or ethnic groups other than their own,

Foreign visitors are probably safe if they refer to America's various racial or ethnic groups with a term that relates to the group's regional or cultural background: African American, Asian American, Arab American, Japanese American, European American, and so on. This terminology conveys the

idea that all such groups are fundamentally equal—that none is to be looked down upon. *People of color*, *non-majority groups*, and *non-dominant groups* are acceptable terms for referring to non-Caucasian groups in general.

Wariness about terminology, coupled with an aversion to verbal confrontation and inconclusive statistical information, leads many Americans to avoid the controversial topic of race relations. Many of them just don't talk about it unless they are angry, frustrated, intoxicated, or in the presence of people who they know share their opinions on the topic.

Like people in other countries with heterogeneous populations, people in the United States are continuing to confront ethnic and racial tensions resulting from factors such as discrimination and the negative stereotypes that different groups hold about one another. Most Americans firmly believe in the idea of equality, at least in theory. Since the U.S. Supreme Court's famous 1954 decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, a decision that outlawed racial segregation in public schools, many court decisions and laws have been aimed at producing more racial equality within the society.

In another key case, the Supreme Court ruled in 1967 that state laws banning interracial marriage were unconstitutional. At the time, such laws still existed in sixteen states, many of which did not officially change their laws to allow interracial marriage until well into the 1970s. The last state to officially remove the law, Alabama, did not do so until 2000. The Census Bureau found in 2008 that 8 percent of marriages were interracial, up from 7 percent in 2000. Interracial marriages, which were most common between blacks and European Americans, were gradually gaining public acceptance.

Another issue that has been widely debated in recent years, particularly on college campuses, is affirmative action. *Affirmative action* refers to policies or programs that try to reduce the effects of current and historical discrimination by giving minority-group members and women greater access to opportunities in education and employment. For example, many universities and professional schools (such as law and business schools) instituted programs designed to increase the enrollment of minority students and females. These programs included outreach to high school students, special admissions criteria, remedial educational programs for students

deemed unprepared for college-level work, and admissions plans that call for a certain level of minority enrollment in a student body.

Americans continue to be divided on the issue of affirmative action. Many see affirmative action programs as positive and even necessary, because they allow minorities greater access to businesses and educational opportunities that are still largely dominated by European American males. Others believe that affirmative action programs are unnecessary or undesirable, because they give an advantage to minorities based not on their merit as individuals but on their membership in groups defined by color, gender, or national origin. As stated in chapter 1, Americans are taught that the ideal person is self-reliant and should advance on the basis of his or her own accomplishments, not because of special treatment given as a result of membership in a particular group.

The issue of affirmative action is complex and evokes people's strong feelings, whatever their points of view on the matter. It is not likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. One possibility seems to be that *socioeconomic status* will replace race as an indicator of disadvantage. If that happened, and it does seem to be happening, then such factors as parents' level of wealth and education, rather than skin color, would be taken into account in making employment and college admissions decisions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

First, think about your own ideas concerning whatever ethnic minority groups are present in the part of the United States you are visiting. What are your stereotypes of them? Do you assume they are kind and hardworking? Intelligent? Ignorant? Dangerous? Consider what your stereotype is based on. Do you have any personal experience on which to base your stereotype?

Think also about your own experience as a member of a "minority group," which is what you are while in the United States. Do people here notice that you are not an American? Do they treat you differently from the way they seem to treat Americans? In your own experience, what is it like to be part of the minority?

And think about the state of "race relations" in your own country. What are the minority groups there? What stereotypes prevail? How, in general, are members of minority groups treated? (If you yourself are a member of a minority group in your country, you may be an expert on this.)

Thinking about questions such as these gives you some context for the remainder of these suggestions.

How often do you see members of different racial or ethnic groups interacting with each other? In what settings? Do you see many mixed-race couples?

If you see people playing sports in public places, are they doing so in mixed groups?

What seating patterns do you see in public places such as buses, cafeterias, parks, and classrooms? Are there clusters of people who appear to share an ethnic background, or are groups intermixed?

Do you notice any apparent correlation between skin color and the kinds of jobs you see people doing?

What housing patterns do you observe? Do you see neighborhoods dominated by one ethnic group or another? Particular apartment buildings? Do you see mixed-race roommates in college housing?

After thinking and observing, seek out opportunities to learn more. Ask a librarian or bookstore employee to suggest a book or two that would help you learn more about whatever minority groups live in the area where you are. Seek out movies made by members of minority groups. Attend performances or festivals mounted by members of minority groups, such as a Cinco de Mayo event in a Mexican community, Oktoberfest among Germans, or Kwaanza among African Americans. Go to performances by members of minority groups; eat in restaurants with cuisines representing different ethnic groups.

Finally, find ways to talk to non-majority people. This can be delicate; it will require some intercultural sensitivity on your part. Have ready some questions about people's backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions. Remember that you can always introduce your questions by saying you are new in the United States and are trying to learn more about the country. If you approach members of minority groups, you can ask them what name they prefer you to use for their group. Then ask your questions. Expect a wide variety of responses, given the complexity of the topic.

It may be easier if you approach members of mixed groups or couples. The fact that they are with others who are different from themselves probably means they will be more open to your questions.

You could also approach professional people who are likely to know something about racial or interethnic relations in your area—teachers, police officers, ministers, journalists. Again, just explain that you are new in the United States, want to learn more about racial and ethnic relations here, and would like to hear what they know and think about that topic.