

## Professional Book Review

Schwede, L., Blumberg, R. L., & Chan, A. Y. (2005). *Complex ethnic households in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 323 pp, ISBN: 0742546373 (pbk). \$32.95

Reviewed by Heewon Chang, Eastern University, USA

The undercount of ethnic minorities in past censuses is not a secret (p. 312). With a desire to understand the cause of the undercount, I picked up this book and have not been disappointed. This edited book provided me with not only an answer to a long-standing puzzle of mine, but also an in-depth understanding of complex family structures embedded in a variety of ethnic households in the United States.

To explore the nature and extent of the undercount of ethnic minorities after the 2000 Census, the Census Bureau funded the ethnographic research of six ethnic communities scattered in the United States: the Navajo in northern Arizona; the Iñupiat in northern Alaska; Korean immigrants in Queens, New York; Hispanic immigrants in central Virginia; African Americans in coastal Virginia; and rural Whites from the upstate New York snowbelt. The book reports the results of separate studies conducted by six ethnographers and the comparative analyses of these studies prepared by three editors.

For the comparison purpose, all studies followed the same research protocol. Each researcher, matching the ethnicity of each studied community, selected a purposive sample of 25 “complex households” defined as households that “include people other than those in the ‘traditional’ nuclear family (biological parents and children)” (p. 5). Applying their cultural knowledge of the community with sensitivity, researchers interviewed members of the households with the focus on three primary questions: (1) what constituted their household or family, (2) what they considered to be “the ideal household structure or composition,” and (3) what criteria they “used to determine membership in the household” (p. 14).

Researchers excavated rich details about family variations and the underling cultural ethos pertaining to their respective community. Fascinating ethnographic data, unique to each of the communities, are presented in chapters authored by Tongue (the Navajo), Craver (the Iñupiat), Kang (the Korean), Goerman (the Hispanic), Holmes (the African American), and Childs (the rural White). Despite many differences, researchers concurred that in all communities the gap existed (1) between the Bureau’s official definitions and the “etic” concepts of household and family held by the interviewees and (2) between the ideal household composition and the reality within complex households. For example, whereas the Bureau expected all residents, family or non-family, to be

counted in a household at the time of census, Navajos, Iñupiat, Koreans, and Hispanics in the studies tended to include family members only, whether cohabiting or non-residential, in a household. Therefore, many cohabiting non-family members were not counted accurately in these communities. On the other hand, African Americans, and rural Whites in a lesser degree, were more willing to include non-family members in the household than the aforementioned groups, yet they did not always apply the principle to mobile non-family cohabiting members of their household. In addition, the gap between the ideal and the actual household composition caused many interviewees to feel embarrassed about or ashamed of disclosing their current household situations, which resulted in intentional exclusion of certain cohabiting members of households. These kinds of gaps contributed to the undercounting of ethnic minorities.

The Bureau did not intend or claim to represent the whole range of ethnic diversity with the six studies. However, I still question the breadth of the selection. By including four out of six communities from the East Coast and two from the “West”—Southwest and Northwest—the research team left out the huge middle region of the United States. I am left to ponder if complex households are more prevalent in the selected regions or if rural Whites in the central regions of the United States are less affected by the trend of complex households. In chapters of comparative analyses, individual studies could have been better contextualized within the “big picture” of complex households that include those in the missing middle region of the country.

This concern, however, is minor in comparison to the overall quality of the book and should not overshadow my full endorsement of it to multicultural educators and scholars. First, the book sheds light on the changing structure of US households that contain children under the 18 years of age. More children live in complex households nowadays than last few decades. The proportion of children living with parents—biological or adoptive—also varies depending on ethnicity, according to the 2000 Census: “A much higher proportion of Asian and Pacific Islander children (83%), non-Hispanic white children (78%), and Hispanic children (69%) lived with two parents...compared with American Indian and Alaska Native children (57%) and black children (40%)” (p. 5). The book clearly exposes the reality that educators need to recognize: all children do not come from a traditional nuclear household like the one from *Ozzie and Harriet*, and variations in the family structure are often the consequence of families’ efforts to create an environment more conducive to caring for children and the elderly. Therefore, the variations should be not subjected to educators’ moral judgment, which can cause embarrassment and shame to children.

Second, the book presents rich ethnographic details of complex households and their cultural context. Educators may be enlightened about, for instance, how the Navajo’s matrilineal and matrilineal tradition elevates women’s position in the household and thus keeps them in the community while allowing

men to leave for work outside the community. In contrast, educators may also learn that the traditional valuation of hunting among Iñupiat men tends to keep men in the community and permit women, often mothers, to search employment away from their home community for the family's sake. The culturally contextualized explanation of household variations, as illustrated here, would meaningfully enhance the cultural knowledge of multicultural educators and scholars.

Third, this book embodies a healthy marriage between the quantitative research of census and the qualitative research of ethnography. Based on the assumption that the census results present a big picture but miss nuanced details that cannot be easily captured through its standardized format, the researchers adopted an ethnographic research design to rescue the specific details about different ethnic communities. The results from this complementary approach have brought a wholesome understanding of ethnic families to light. This type of collaborative and complementary work uniquely merges advantages of qualitative and quantitative data and sets forth a research model desirable for multicultural education.

Considering the aforementioned strengths, the book is a must-read for multicultural educators and scholars who work with and desire to gain in-depth understanding of the particular ethnic populations in and outside the studied communities. This book would also be particularly helpful to social scientists who are interested in combining census and ethnographic data in a meaningful cultural analysis of ethnic communities.