INTERETHNIC FAMILIES: THE DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORY OF A MAJOR STUDY

VICKI CARRINGTON

University of Queensland

Introduction

Australian researchers have been taking note of the expanding phenomenon of marriage across cultural boundaries since the influx of post-World War Two immigrants. For the most part, however, this attention has taken the form of analyses of demographic data and the construction and interpretation of statistical information based upon census figures. The underlying concern of this research has been to chart the generational assimilation of these various 'new' Australians into the mainstream of Australian life and culture (Gray 1987, 1989, Jones 1991, McCaa 1989, Price 1982, 1989, 1993, 1994, Price & Zubrzycki 1962a, 1962b, Young 1991). Underpinning this research priority has been the presumption of a culturally and racially Anglo-Celtic core culture into which immigrants would assimilate, becoming identifiably 'Australian'.

At the same time, the specificities of Australia's political history have resulted in the disappearance of 'race'. This backgrounding of race as a category is linked to Australia's adoption of multiculturalism in response to the arrival and demonstrable non-assimilation of European and Levantine immigrants from the late 1950s (Stratton 1998). However, the adoption of the broad-based categories emerging from multicultural policy acted to preclude institutional recognition of subcultural and locality-specific identifications or any overt reference to race. Multicultural policies and discourses, in their attempt to ensure effective political representation of ethnic communities (Stratton 1998), created a narrative based around multiple separate ethnic communities living in a colourful harmony.

While occupying what are seen to be oppositional standpoints, both assimilation and multiculturalism reflect a specifically modernist vision of the social world—a vision which has a limited capacity for recognizing the growing numbers of families which exist across racial and cultural boundaries. It is the emergence and significance of this demographic that Interethnic Families...
addresses. I begin by outlining the emergence of contemporary racial and cultural politics and their significance of Interethnic Families. Next, I outline the parameters and methodology of this research project. Throughout, my purpose is to foreground the significance of this particular research within contemporary Australia.

**Race and ethnicity**

Where it was once considered self-evident that race and culture were markers of innate difference (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin 1998), this notion has been increasingly problematized in postmodern and postcolonial theory. The new emphasis in philosophic poststructuralism on the existence of multiple subjectivities has meant that the ethnic and racial identifications which individuals and groups may assume are no longer taken to be essential and organically-binding characteristics.

Race, as a definitive category, is linked strongly to the constructed dualism between primitive (traditional) and civilised (modern) societies which has characterised modern European social theory (Goody 1996, Stratton 1998, Vidich & Lyman 1994). Underpinning the use of race as a classificatory system is the desire for a hierarchical social arrangement, linked to strategies of, and for, dominance (Ashcroft et al. 1998). Historically, these patterns of dominance have been constructed by, and to the advantage of, white colonial nations. Luke and Luke (1998, p. 729) describe these classificatory systems and the institutions which were structured around them as ‘early twentieth-century technologies of surveillance’. They go on to argue that ‘identifications of skin colour and phenotypical features are typically equated in the public imaginary as part of a “readable” code of difference, ranging from lack and defect to exoticism and “noble savage” primitivism’ (1998, p. 731). Modernist notions of race as a static category allowed the assumption that distinctions could be made between individuals and groups on the basis of racial purity and/or racial typing (Ashcroft et al. 1998).

Thus race, as a modern category, emerged as a corollary of Western colonialism and its attempt to construct a pro-Western hierarchy which justified its political and mercantile aggression. Fordist societies maintained race as a substantive marker of difference. However, as the civil rights movements of the 1960s and the growing racial hybridity of contemporary times attest, this categorisation system is increasingly challenged. The shift out of Fordist regimes towards increasing globalisation is further weakening any presumption of a linear connection between physical characteristics and identity. In the current destabilisation of nationstate narratives, increasing numbers of individuals are