Racial boundaries and persistent inequality
The case of African Americans

Jessica S. Welburn

Du Bois famously argues that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colorline” (Du Bois 1986: 359). Du Bois focuses specifically on the negative impact that racial boundaries in the United States can have on opportunities and outcomes for African Americans. Although he writes at the turn of the twentieth century, the colorline continues to have an impact on all aspects of life for members of stigmatized groups in the USA and abroad. This chapter will use the case of African Americans in the US post-Civil Rights Era to explore the ways in which racial boundaries can shape life circumstances. First, I briefly explore the persistence of racial boundaries in the USA. I argue that while African Americans have made progress in the post-Civil Rights Era, racial boundaries have an impact on interactions, opportunities and outcomes. Second, I review some of the most significant barriers facing African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era, which include neighborhood circumstances, health outcomes, incarceration rates and racial discrimination. Third, I review research on how African Americans interpret and respond to their position in the USA. I focus specifically on African Americans’ attitudes about inequality. Throughout this chapter I also emphasize the ways in which class can intersect with race to shape African Americans’ experiences. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of research on racial and ethnic boundaries outside of the USA.

Racial boundaries and African Americans: an overview

Lamont and Molnar (2002) argue that “The concept of boundary has been central to the study of ethnic and racial inequality as an alternative to more static cultural or even biological theories of ethnic and racial differences” (ibid.: 174). Racial and ethnic boundaries are shaped by a combination of in-group and out-group processes. It is often argued that the USA has one of the more rigid systems of racial classification; Patterson (2005) claims that the USA has a binary system of racial classification, namely that racial groups are divided into two categories: black and white. Even as the country diversifies, Patterson argues that Americans often make distinctions between blacks and non-blacks. Non-blacks include whites and some other minorities who have assimilated with whites. In contrast, the black category includes a segregated population of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities who have not assimilated with whites. A number of scholars have worked to explain the persistence of racial boundaries in the USA.
Jessica S. Welburn

(Feagin and Sikes 1994; Fleming et al. 2012; Omi and Winant 1994). For example, Omi and Winant (1994) argue that race operates separately from other social categories in the USA and shapes interactions and institutions. They argue specifically that racial and ethnic boundaries are often politically constructed and contested. They emphasize that the state plays an important role in the formation and persistence of racial and ethnic boundaries.

Data on interpersonal relationships between African Americans and out-group members sheds light on the strength of racial boundaries in the USA. For example, survey data has shown that, while African Americans tend to prefer living in integrated neighborhoods, they are viewed as the least desirable neighbors by out-group members. Charles (2000) uses data from the Los Angeles Survey of Urban Inequality to examine the neighborhood preferences of whites, African Americans, Latinos and Asians. She finds that whites, Latinos and Asians all list African Americans as their least preferred neighbors. However, when African Americans are asked to describe their ideal neighborhood, it is on average only 37.41 per cent African American. African Americans are also more likely to be close friends with other African Americans (Massey et al. 2003). This can be attributed to feeling closer to other in-group members (ibid.) and living in closer proximity to other in-group members (Mouw and Entwisle 2006). Acceptance for interracial marriage has grown significantly since the mid-twentieth century. In 1985 only 48 per cent of Americans approved of intermarriage between African Americans and whites, compared to 83 per cent in 2010. Yet, African Americans have more positive attitudes toward interracial marriage than whites. In 2010 40 per cent of whites reported believing that increased interracial marriage rates are positive for society, compared to 51 per cent of African Americans (Wang 2012). In addition, African Americans are also more likely to marry interracially than whites – in 2010 9 per cent of whites intermarried compared to 17 per cent of African Americans (ibid.). However, African Americans are less likely than other racial minorities to intermarry. Wang (ibid.) finds that in 2010 26 per cent of Hispanics and 28 per cent of Asians married interracially. This may suggest that racial boundaries remain more rigid for African Americans than for other racial groups in the USA.

Racial boundaries in the USA are important because they shape opportunities and outcomes for African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era. Thus, exploring the current circumstances of African Americans in more detail is key to understanding the role that race continues to play in the USA.

African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era

The US Civil Rights movement brought about significant changes for African Americans. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination on the basis of “race, color, religion, sex or national orientation” illegal in the USA. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 worked to end the disenfranchisement of African American voters by putting in place significant federal voting laws and outlawing a number of discriminatory practices such as literacy tests for voters. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 was enacted to curb housing discrimination. These and other measures served essentially to abolish legalized Jim Crow segregation and to curb legalized racial discrimination in the USA (Brooks 2009).

A number of social scientists have pointed to progress made by African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era. For example, Patterson (1998b) argues that circumstances for African Americans have improved significantly in the post-Civil Rights Era. He argues that given the history of slavery and legalized racial discrimination in the USA, “the achievements of the American people over the past half century in reducing racial prejudice and discrimination and in improving the socioeconomic and political condition of Afro-Americans are nothing short of
astonishing” (ibid.: 15). Wilson (1980) famously argues that class has become a more significant determinant of life outcomes for African Americans than race. While Wilson does not argue that race no longer shapes the experiences of African Americans, he emphasizes that, particularly for middle-class African Americans, opportunities have improved since the mid-twentieth century.

Data on the circumstances of African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era do reveal significant improvements in position. For example, educational attainment rates have improved significantly for African Americans since the passage of Civil Rights legislation in the mid-twentieth century. Overall incomes have improved for African Americans and overall poverty rates have also declined. The 2008 election and 2012 reelection of President Barack Obama has sparked further debate about racial progress in the USA. On the one hand, the election of an African American president may suggest that racial boundaries are becoming less rigid in the USA (Reed and Louis 2009). On the other hand, while circumstances for African Americans have improved, racial disparities in the USA persist.

**Education and employment**

Educational attainment rates have improved significantly for African Americans since the mid-twentieth century. Yet, their educational attainment rates remain lower than for whites. For example, in 1960 43.2 per cent of whites completed high school diplomas compared to 21.7 per cent of African Americans. In contrast, in 2012 the figures were 92.5 per cent of whites compared to 85.7 per cent of African Americans. In 1960 8.1 per cent of whites had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 3.5 per cent of African Americans. In 2012, 34.5 per cent of whites earned college degrees, compared to 21.4 per cent of African Americans (Digest of Education Statistics 2012).

Unemployment rates for African Americans have been consistently higher for African Americans than for whites. For example, in 1975 7.8 per cent of whites were unemployed compared to 14.8 per cent of African Americans. Unemployment rates for African Americans fell to a low of 7.6 per cent in 2000. Yet, unemployment rates for whites were only 3.5 per cent in 2000. In 2010, at the height of the global recession, 8.7 per cent of whites were unemployed compared to 16 per cent of African Americans (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).

**Income and wealth**

Economic circumstances have also improved slightly for African Americans. In 1966 41.8 per cent of African Americans were living below the poverty line compared to 25.8 per cent in 2011 (Macartney et al. 2013). Yet poverty rates remain much higher for African Americans than for whites – in 2011 11.6 per cent of whites lived below the poverty line (ibid.). In 1967 the median household income for African Americans was $25,996 compared to $50,544 for whites. The gap had narrowed slightly by 2012 but remained large – the median income for African American households was $33,321 compared to $57,009 for whites (DeSilver 2013). Income disparities persist even with increases in educational attainment. For example, 2011 American Community Survey data shows that while whites who hold at least a bachelor’s degree earn a median annual income of $65,252, African Americans who hold at least a bachelor’s degree earn a median annual income of just $49,435 (American Community Survey 2011). Gaps in income only provide partial insights into economic disparities between African Americans and whites.

When looking more closely at financial assets such as savings, stocks, bonds and property ownership, African Americans remain far behind whites. Oliver and Shapiro (2013) argue that this is the result of a combination of factors, including exclusion from government policies that
increased wealth for white Americans, persistent racism and discrimination, and relatively low entrepreneurship rates for African Americans. Income and wealth gaps between African Americans and whites in the USA have only widen since the 2008 global recession (Kochhar 2011). In 2009 the median net worth of white households was $113,149 compared to just $5,677 for African American households (ibid.).

Oliver and Shapiro (2013) emphasize that, even for African Americans who earn middle-class incomes, limited wealth remains a significant obstacle. Oliver and Shapiro draw upon in-depth interviews with middle-class white and African American families to compare their everyday financial experiences. They find that, because of limited wealth, middle-class African Americans are more likely than whites to feel the negative impact of sudden changes to their economic circumstances. For example, African Americans who divorce are more likely to experience economic instability because of a limited access to financial assets (ibid.: 125). In addition, African Americans experience more job instability than whites. This may include having to work more than one job to maintain middle-class status (ibid.: 124). Middle-class African Americans are also more likely than middle-class whites to experience intergenerational downward mobility.

Using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Isaacs et al. (2008) find that the majority of whites who grew up in middle-income households are able to exceed their parents’ socioeconomic status. In contrast, fewer than half of African Americans who grew up in middle-income households are able to do so. Lacy (2012) argues that it is important to take into account income differences within the African American middle class when assessing their economic position. Upper-middle-class African Americans experience more financial stability than other middle-class African Americans. For example, upper-middle-class African Americans have experienced fewer foreclosures than lower-middle-class African Americans since the 2008 recession.

The following sections explore several factors that contribute to disparate outcomes for African Americans, including neighborhood circumstances, incarceration rates, family instability and persistent racism and discrimination.

**Neighborhood circumstances**

Racial residential segregation has a significant impact on the life experiences of African Americans.

Residential segregation is not a neutral fact; it systematically undermines the social and economic well-being of the United States. Because of racial segregation, a significant share of black America is condemned to experience a social environment where poverty and joblessness are the norm, where a majority of children are born out of wedlock, where most families are on welfare, where educational failure prevails, and where social and physical deterioration abound.

(Massey and Denton 1993: 2)

Massey (2004) argues that “a majority of all African Americans, and the large majority of urban African Americans, continue to experience high levels of residential segregation in U.S. cities” (ibid.: 11). Massey estimates that approximately 40 per cent of African Americans are hypersegregated. African Americans experience racial residential segregation across income levels (Marsh and Iceland 2010; Massey 2004). Neighborhood segregation is important because it shapes access to opportunities, including jobs and good schools.
Wilson (1997) argues that mid- to late-twentieth century deindustrialization led to a decline in availability of low-wage, low-skilled jobs for African Americans living in inner cities. Factories and other businesses located in cities closed in large numbers. Some businesses relocated to the suburbs, making it difficult for low-income inner-city residents to access job opportunities. Isolation can also limit access to the networks needed to learn about job opportunities.

Neighborhood disadvantage can also shape interactions between individuals. Wilson (1997) argues that a lack of job opportunities in low-income neighborhoods can lead to increased criminal activity. Specifically, he argues that “the process of inner-city neighborhood deterioration has been clearly related to the growth of the inner-city drug industry. The decline of legitimate employment opportunities among inner-city residents increases the incentive to sell drugs” (ibid.: 58). Drug activity can in turn lead to increased violence and gang-related crime. Anderson (2000) explores the dynamics of a poor, predominantly African American neighborhood in Philadelphia. Through ethnographic observations, Anderson finds that neighborhood residents must navigate persistent poverty, high crime rates and limited educational and employment opportunities. Navigating these circumstances becomes a daily project for neighborhood residents. As a result, Anderson argues that a “code of the street” has developed in the neighborhood. He argues that this code serves as “a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence” (Anderson 2000: 33). He explains (ibid.):

The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale allowing those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way.

Anderson argues that African American families in this neighborhood can be divided into two categories: “decent and street.” The decent families are those who subscribe to “mainstream” American values, including hard work, educational attainment and strong family. In contrast, “street” families do not subscribe to these mainstream values and are more likely to become involved in criminal activity. Anderson documents the constant tension between street and decent families in the neighborhood.

In the post-Civil Rights Era, middle-class African Americans have moved out of some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the USA. Yet, the neighborhoods that they live in are still not on par with the neighborhoods that middle-class whites live in. In fact, middle-class African Americans are more likely to live in racially segregated neighborhoods and in close proximity to economic disadvantage than whites (Pattillo 2000). This can have important consequences for their social interactions and access to resources. For example, in an ethnography of a mixed-income, predominantly African American neighborhood in Chicago, Pattillo-McCoy (1999) finds that middle-class (and particularly lower-middle-class) families often struggle to separate themselves from negative social situations including crime and drug activity. Similarly, Wilson and Taub (2011) argue that middle-class African Americans living in mixed-income neighborhoods must navigate “manifestations of social disarray.” It is important to note that Lacy (2007) argues that upper-middle-class African Americans face a different set of circumstances. With access to more financial resources than their lower-middle-class counterparts, upper-middle-class African Americans tend to reside in more stable neighborhoods.

Incarceration

Incarceration rates have climbed significantly in the USA since the mid-twentieth century. However, incarceration rates for African Americans are higher than for any other group.
Incarceration rates are particularly high for African American males. Using data from the Public Safety and Mobility Project, Western and Pettit (2010) find that African American men born between 1975 and 1979 have a 26.8 per cent chance of being incarcerated during their lifetime. In contrast, white men born during the same period have only a 5.4 per cent chance of being incarcerated. Alexander (2012) argues that the criminal justice system serves to preserve the American racial hierarchy in the post-Civil Rights Era. While legalized segregation has ended, mass incarceration in the USA serves to restrict the social and economic options of many African Americans (ibid.: 13). Incarceration can have an impact on all dimensions of an individual’s life, including their employment opportunities and family relationships. Incarceration can also have an impact on health outcomes (Western and Pettit 2010). For example, Schnittker et al. (2011) find that individuals who have been incarcerated are more likely to have asthma, diabetes or hypertension.

Family circumstances

Marriage rates have declined for all groups in the USA since the mid-twentieth century. Social scientists have attributed this decline to a number of factors, including increased participation of women in the workforce and increasingly less restrictive divorce laws (Cherlin 2010). Yet, Gross (2005) argues that the idea of “lifelong, internally stratified marriage” remains an important norm guiding relationships in the USA. While we have witnessed a rise in alternative relationship arrangements, evidence shows that many individuals still hope to get married (ibid.). However, the decline in marriage rates has been much more severe for African Americans than for whites. In the USA disproportionately high incarceration rates, high mortality rates, high unemployment rates and low educational attainment rates for African American men may restrict the availability of desirable partners for African American women (Anderson 2000; Darity and Myers 1984; Marsh et al. 2007; Massey et al. 2003; Wilson 1987). Social scientists have also argued that unstable gender relations contribute to low marriage rates for African Americans (Collins 2008; Patterson 1998a). Some have argued that since slavery, African American men in the U.S. have been deprived of the role of provider. This has continued as African American men face persistent structural barriers. As a result African American women have often been forced to take on the role of provider and consequentially have struggled to combat stereotypes of being overly independent and aggressive (Collins 2008; Patterson 1998a).

Declining marriage rates can have a number of important consequences for African Americans. First, married individuals are more likely to be financially stable and often have access to more financial resources than individuals who are not married. Thus, marriage is a critical part of class reproduction (Marsh et al. 2007). Second, as marriage rates have declined, rates of single parenthood have gone up. Children who grow up in single parent homes are more likely to grow up in poverty, face academic troubles, and become single parents themselves.

Racism and discrimination

Previous research has demonstrated that African Americans continue to believe that racial inequality has a negative impact on the outcomes of members of their group (e.g. Bobo 2011; Bobo and Charles 2009; Hochschild 1996; Hunt 2007). For example, using data from the General Social Survey, Bobo (2011) finds that African Americans are more likely than whites to believe that discrimination contributes to the persisting socioeconomic status (SES) gap between African Americans and whites. Surveyed between 2000 and 2008, 30 per cent of whites and 59 per cent
The case of African Americans

of African Americans attribute the SES gap to discrimination. These findings illustrate African Americans’ continued awareness of racial discrimination.

Research shows that African Americans continue to face racism and discrimination in a number of contexts. Experiences are both overt and covert. For example, a number of studies have documented the impact that job market discrimination can have on African Americans (Darity and Mason 1998; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Mong and Roscigno 2010; Wilson 1997). Wilson (ibid.) draws upon in-depth interviews with 179 employers in the Chicago metropolitan area to explore the impact that race can have on hiring practices. He finds that employers may stereotype low-income African American workers (especially males) as “uneducated, unstable, uncooperative, and dishonest” (ibid.: 111). Pager and Western (2012) compare the experiences of white and African American men aged 21 to 24 applying for low-wage jobs in New York City and Milwaukee. Following job interviews, white applicants in both cities received callbacks and job offers approximately twice as often as African American applicants. Other forms of discrimination across occupations can range from disparities in wages to failing to be promoted at the same rate as whites (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Fleming et al. 2012; Mong and Roscigno 2010; Roscigno 2007).

Housing audit studies also show that African Americans often experience discrimination when looking for properties to rent or buy (Yinger 1995). Ross and Turner (2005) explore housing discrimination in the rental and sales markets using data from the 2000 HDS. They randomly selected housing advertisements in the Sunday newspapers and submitted applications from African American and white applicants to selected units. They compare their results with Yinger (1995) and argue that discrimination in the housing market has declined since 1989, but remains persistent. African Americans report racism and discrimination in a number of other contexts, including getting service in public places. For example, Fleming et al. (2012) recount the story of an African American man who experienced covert discrimination while traveling in an elevator in a public building. He recalled that, as soon as he entered the elevator, a white woman who was also in the elevator immediately clutched her purse. To him, this signaled that she believed as an African American male he might be a dangerous criminal.

Class can shape how African Americans perceive and manage experiences with racism and discrimination (Lamont and Fleming 2005; Young 2004). Young (ibid.) argues that African Americans in racially segregated, economically disadvantaged neighborhoods may have fewer experiences with racism and discrimination. In contrast, middle-class African Americans are more likely to live, work, and spend leisure time in integrated environments. As a result, they may be more aware of the negative impact that racism and discrimination can have on opportunities for members of their group. In contrast, Feagin and Sikes (1994) argue that for middle-class African Americans managing persistent racism and discrimination is a part of daily life. The experiences of the African American middle class led Hochschild (1996) famously to argue that members of this group are “succeeding more but enjoying it less.”

Drawing upon in-depth interviews, Fleming et al. (2012) explore how working-class and middle-class African Americans navigate persistent racism and discrimination. Their respondents experience racism and discrimination in a number of contexts, including at school, in the workplace, and in public places. Respondents’ experiences with racism and discrimination include being misunderstood, over-scrutinized, and disrespected. They argue that African Americans have a repertoire of destigmatization strategies for navigating these experiences. Strategies include confronting, educating the discriminator, and walking away. Destigmatization strategies can depend upon what respondents believe is at stake in a particular situation. Thus, they argue that African Americans engage in “management of the self,” which “has to do with (1) projecting an image of oneself that is positive or conform to out-group norms, so as to gain recognition,
and (2) self-protection and the development of various aspects of identity” (Fleming et al. 2012: 144). Lamont et al. (2013) argue that neoliberalism shapes responses to discrimination for African Americans. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 150 working-class and middle-class African Americans, they find their respondents emphasize the importance of individualistic destigmatization strategies such as hard work, educational attainment, and personal responsibility. They argue “More than ever, many African Americans may have become convinced that self-reliance, economic success, individual achievement, and consumption are the best response to stigmatization” (ibid.: 144).

Weighing structural- and individual-level explanations for racial inequality in the USA

Literature on racial attitudes sheds light on how African Americans and whites weigh structural- and individual-level explanations for persistent racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights Era. Social scientists have argued that whites’ explanations of racial disparities have shifted. In general, whites have become less likely to believe that African Americans are biologically inferior and more likely to believe that the remaining racial disparities between African Americans and whites are caused by what they perceive to be a lack of effort on the part of African Americans (Byrd 2011). Henry and Sears (2002) define symbolic racism as a “coherent belief system” that includes the belief that African Americans are responsible for their own circumstances and the belief that any demands that African Americans make to improve their situation are not valid. Bobo and Smith (1998) argue that “laissez-faire racism blames African Americans themselves for the black-white gap in socioeconomic standing and actively resists meaningful efforts to ameliorate America’s racist social conditions and institutions” (ibid.: 186). They argue that laissez-faire racism is a more nuanced theory than symbolic racism because it explains the change in whites’ racial attitudes in the post-Civil Rights Era. Bonilla-Silva (2001) defines whites’ attitudes about racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights Era as colorblind racism. He defines colorblind racism as the belief that in the post-Civil Rights Era the USA has eliminated barriers that deny African Americans the same opportunities as whites. As a consequence, colorblind racism holds African Americans responsible for any remaining barriers that their group faces. He identifies three specific frames of colorblind racism: “abstract liberalism,” “biologization of culture,” and “naturalization of matters that reflect the effects of white supremacy.”

Understandings of persistent inequality are more complex for African Americans. Because of their experiences, African Americans are more likely to believe that racial inequality shapes opportunities to get ahead in the USA. However, an emerging body of research suggests that African Americans may be increasingly likely to believe that individual-level and structural-level factors contribute to their group’s position. Hunt (2007) draws upon General Social Survey (GSS) data to explore how African Americans explain the persistent economic gap between their group and that of whites. He finds that while only 19.6 per cent of whites attribute the black/white socioeconomic gap to a combination of structural and motivational factors, 33.2 per cent of African Americans combine structural and motivational explanations. He also finds that between 1977 and 2004 African Americans became less likely to attribute the black/white SES gap solely to structural factors and are more likely to employ motivational explanations. Similarly, Bobo et al. (2012) use GSS data to show that African Americans may be becoming increasingly individualistic in their explanations of persistent inequality. In addition, they find that African Americans are becoming less likely to support affirmative action policy. This suggests further gravitation toward individualistic explanations of inequality. Welburn and Pittman (2012) draw upon 45 interviews to explore how middle-class African Americans think about the election of
US President Barack Obama. They find that, for the majority of their respondents, Obama’s election serves as evidence that in the post-Civil Rights Era African Americans can get ahead if they work hard enough. While respondents acknowledge the persistence of racism and discrimination, they also believe that African Americans should take more responsibility for their outcomes. More research is needed on how African Americans explain persistent racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights Era and the impact that it might have on their sense of group identity and their navigation of racial boundaries in the USA.

The US case demonstrates the ways in which racial boundaries shape the experiences of African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era. Civil Rights Era legislation helped to create new opportunities for African Americans. As a result, life circumstances for African Americans improved on a number of dimensions. However, research also shows that African Americans continue to face a number of obstacles, including limited access to economic resources, challenging neighborhood circumstances, and persistent racism and discrimination. Thus, the US case demonstrates that strong racial boundaries can have an important impact on inequality.

**Minorities abroad**

While this chapter focuses on African Americans in the USA, exploring how national context shapes the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities is essential to unpacking the role of race in the twenty-first century. National context may shape the permeability of racial boundaries; it can also shape how racial and ethnic minorities perceive and respond to their position (Lamont and Molnar 2002). For example, through in-depth experiences, Lamont (2000) compares the experiences of working-class African Americans and North African immigrant men in France. She focuses on the strategies they use to combat racism and discrimination. Both groups emphasize their sense of morality and humanity to demonstrate equality with the dominant groups in their countries. However, in contrast to African Americans, North African immigrants may find responses constrained by their immigrant status. In addition, they are more likely than African Americans to place blame on members of their own group for racism. In addition, North African immigrants are less likely than African Americans to believe that earning money is a way to demonstrate equality to the dominant group. Mizrachi and Zawdu (2012) explore the destigmatization strategies of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. They find that Ethiopian Jews use religion to seek equality with the dominant group while downplaying racial discrimination. In contrast, Mizrachi and Herzog (2012) argue that Arab Israelis use a shared sense of humanity as a destigmatization strategy. Thus, they focus less on religious differences and more on the common human experience that they share with Jews in Israel. Silva and Reis (2012) explore the destigmatization strategies of working-class and middle-class Afro-Brazilians. They find that the majority of their respondents focus on Brazil’s history of racial mixing to argue that all groups are equal. Research should continue to explore the extent to which national context shapes the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. This will enhance our understanding of how racial and ethnic boundaries are formed and negotiated.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the impact that racial boundaries in the USA have on the experiences of African Americans. I have shown that, while African Americans have made progress since the mid-twentieth century, they face persistent barriers in the USA. Thus, navigating and making sense of persistent racial inequality is central to the African American experience. Navigating
racial and ethnic boundaries is also central to the experience of stigmatized groups outside of the USA. Research in a number of countries, including France, Brazil and Israel, shows that national context can have an impact on the salience of racial and ethnic boundaries and the ways in which these boundaries are navigated. Future research should continue to focus on how racial and ethnic boundaries shape the life circumstances of members of stigmatized groups in the USA and abroad.

Notes

1. All income figures are in 2012 dollars.
2. Massey and Denton (1993) use a dissimilarity index to measure racial residential segregation. This index measures the “unevenness of Black and White settlement across neighborhoods” (Massey 2004: 9). Dissimilarity index scores range from 1 to 100. High segregation is considered a dissimilarity index of 60 or higher. African Americans are hypersegregated if they have a dissimilarity index score of 60 or higher on five established dimensions of segregation: evenness, isolation, clustering, centralization, and concentration.
3. Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues that “abstract liberalism” is defined as a belief in egalitarian principles, that “biologizaton of culture” is defined as the use of culture to explain persistent racial disparities, that “naturalization of racial matters” is defined as the belief that persistent racial inequality is a natural occurrence, and that “minimization of racism” is defined as the denial of persistent racism and discrimination (ibid.: 142).

References


