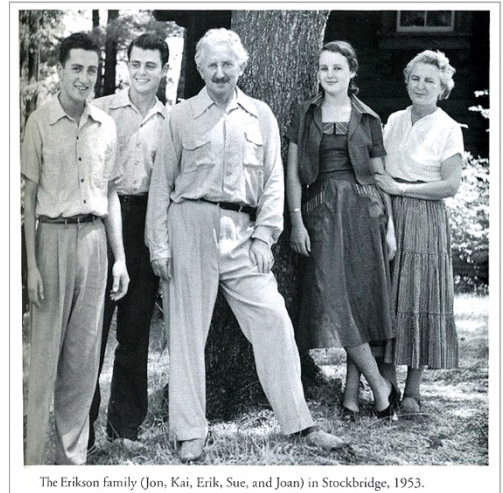


## Socio-Historical Context for Erik Erikson's Theory of Development

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Although born in Germany in 1902 to a Jewish Danish mother (and unknown father), Erikson came to the United States in 1933 with his Canadian-born wife, Joan, and their two young children under the threat of the Nazis who came to power that year. Prior to coming to the U.S., he was trained as a psychoanalyst in Vienna, Austria with Freud's daughter, Anna, as his own psychoanalyst. But Erikson's theory of human development was grounded in his experience of American society. His first presentation of the eight stages of development appeared in 1950 and later he published two further books in 1959 and 1968 that expanded on his theory, particularly in respect to late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. What was American society like in the period from 1950 through the 1970s? In his 2007 biography of Erikson, Duquesne University psychologist and historian, Daniel Burston, offers observations about that time (as compared to the 21<sup>st</sup> century; see pp. 193-194). I've added other notes, too.



The Erikson family (Jon, Kai, Erik, Sue, and Joan) in Stockbridge, 1953.

- “Erikson generally assumed the existence of stable, intact nuclear families--ones in which the father works, and the mother manages the household affairs.”
- A low divorce rate with, in the 1950s, far fewer women in the labor force.
- Businesses ran on typewriters and rotary telephones--not computers and cell phones
- Gay and lesbian adults were still mostly “in the closet” and it was quite rare for LGBT individuals to even dream of parenting or adopting children (let alone marriage)
- High school diplomas were still avenues to decent employment.
- Teens often went right to work after graduation from high school.
- The average individual did not need a bachelor's degree to get an entry level job in most of industry or commerce.
- Child day-care centers were relatively rare
- The changes of physical puberty (appearance of secondary sexual characteristics) were later than today, especially for girls.
- Teens became sexually active at a later age (often 19 or 20 years old) compared to today.
- Until 1966, there were no birth control pills giving women control over their reproductive choices.
- More Americans were religiously observant and quiet practitioners of their faith.
- Until 1965, there was still legal (*de jure*) segregation of the White and African American population throughout the South and *de facto* segregation in many

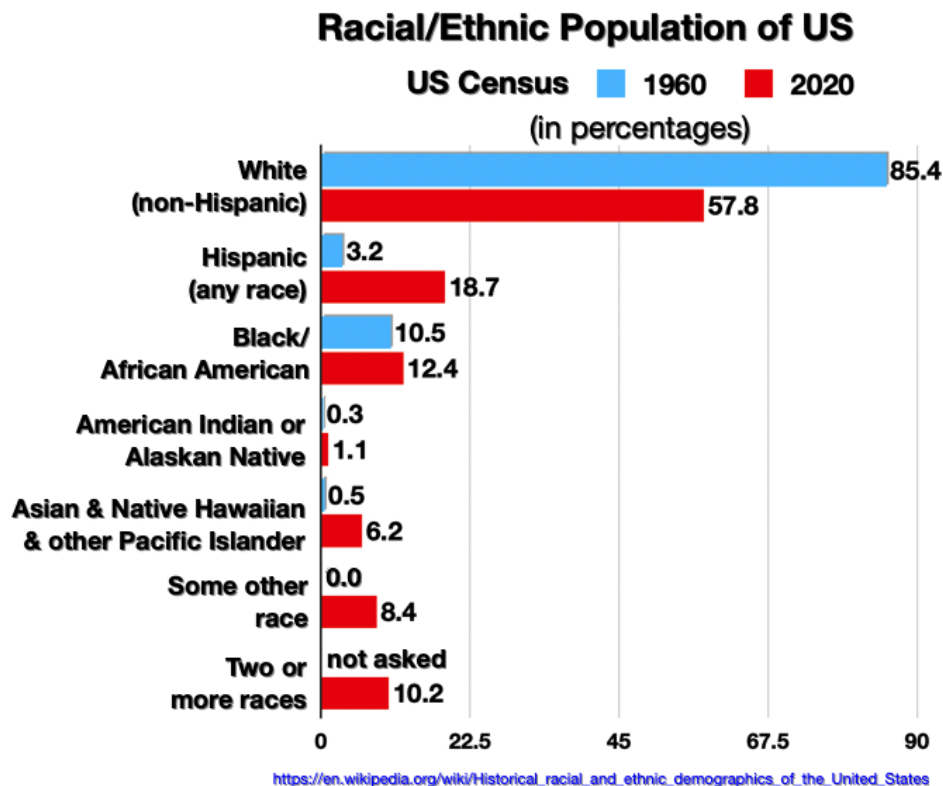
Northern states as well in housing, schooling, access to stores and public facilities, etc.

- Civil rights and anti-discrimination laws for jobs, housing, and education which protected women, disabled citizens, LGBT individuals were either non-existent or weak.
- Mandatory retirement at age 65 for almost all jobs was legal in the US until the passage of two federal laws in 1978 & 1986 (von Wachte, 2002, Yoffe, 2011). Men and women HAD to leave employment in many places by their 66<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### Race and ethnicity in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century

The Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) set the limit for immigrants allowed into the US at 2% of the total number of immigrants from each country as found on the 1890 census. This favored immigrants from Northern and Western Europe (e.g., British, Irish, German, French). This standard effectively limited any significant further immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe (e.g., Italians, Jews, Greeks, etc.) as well as people from Africa or Latin America. The act completely excluded any immigrants from Asia. The provisions of this act were extensively changed by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Based upon the impact of the changes in immigration policy beginning after 1965, the period from 1950 to 2020 has seen extraordinary shifts in the composition of the U.S. population.



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