CHAPTER 29

ECOLOGICAL THEORY AND RESEARCH IN MULTICULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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In 1965, in the small town of Swampscott, Massachusetts, a small group of radical clinical psychologists held a conference that marked the official birth of community psychology (Heller, Price, Reinharz, Riger, & Wandersman, 1984; Rappaport, 1977). Conference participants' dissatisfaction with the then-current trends in mental health practice, such as an emphasis on treatment rather than prevention and a focus on individuals without attending to the contexts within which they lived, facilitated their departure from a field dominated by the medical model. In accordance with this model, institutional treatment was based on the premise that individuals' illnesses lay solely within his or her body, and drugs and psychotherapy were the best approaches for treatment. Thus, one of the forces that influenced the birth of community psychology was the community mental health movement (Murray & Perkins, 1997). Its main premise was that individuals' problems could not be treated out of context and that those individuals with mental health and other problems needed to be provided with the necessary community support systems, such as housing, counseling, leisure, and employment opportunities, to allow them to function in the community (Heller et al., 1984).

The other characteristic of the movement was an emphasis on prevention over treatment (Felner, Yates, & Silverman, 2000). This movement marked a paradigm shift in research on multicultural and marginalized populations by emphasizing the role of the environment in producing and contributing to social issues (Rappaport, 1977). An essential part of the social environment is the cultural context of the individual and the community of concern. Research and theory development in community psychology has been influenced strongly by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory.

Seymour Sarason, a well-known community psychologist, was influential in challenging traditional clinical psychologists to apply ecological theory to the study of complex social problems. He made a strong call for psychology to strive to understand the complexities of community settings (Sarason, 1976). Sarason argued that community settings, which are characterized by complex sociocultural factors, shaped people's behaviors. His focus of research was schools, which he called complex multicultural ecological settings.

The application of ecological theory and community psychology principles and values has contributed to the advancement of multicultural psychology theory and research (see Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994). In particular, ecological and community perspectives have expanded and contextualized our theoretical understanding of the cultural embeddedness of the constructs relevant to multicultural psychology, including gender issues (e.g., D'Augelli, 2006); acculturation (Birman, 1994; Birman, Trickett, & Buchanan, 2005); and race, culture, and ethnicity (Berry, 1994; Chronister, 2006). In addition, ecological and community perspectives have informed innovative approaches to research on these topics. Ecological theory has been the core foundation of multicultural research from a community psychology

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perspective (see discussions by Kelly, Ryan, Altman, & Stelzner, 2000; Lounsbury & Mitchell, 2009).

This chapter discusses the essence of ecological theory and presents a synthesis of the principles of the field of community psychology that have guided research and theoretical understanding of multicultural psychology. It also discusses ecologically grounded research on cultural competence from a community psychology perspective. Last, it discusses implications for future research from this perspective.

ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Ecological theory examines the interaction between the individual and his or her cultural and sociopolitical environment, placing much emphasis on the relationships formed by interacting levels of influence. Lewin (1935) was an early advocate of the premise that behavior was a function of the interaction between the person and his or her environment. An ecological approach to multicultural psychology focuses on the transactions between individuals and social systems, the system's relationships with other systems, and the balance of social structures and processes that allow individuals to engage with different systems (Kelly et al., 2000). According to Kelly et al., an ecological approach seeks to understand the interrelationships of social structures and the processes of groups, organizations, and communities in which we live, work, play, and perform our daily activities. Kelly et al. asserted that social systems are community settings in which we participate that have their own rules, norms, and values.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Although ecology is "the field of environmental biology" (Levine & Perkins, 1997, p. 113), an ecological perspective has much to offer to our understanding of theory in multicultural psychology. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) development of an ecological model to examine child development provided a framework to analyze the influence of the environment on individual behavior. He posited that the

> understanding of human development requires going beyond the direct observation of behavior; it also requires examination of multiple systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the individual. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner (1977) identified four nested levels of influence within the ecological environment that affect individual and group behaviors. The first level is the *microsytem,* which is the "complex of relations between the individual and environment in an immediate setting" (p. 514). This individual domain includes the person; his or her immediate family; and others within the home, school, or workplace with their own cultural identities, traditions, rituals, and behavioral preferences. The second level of influence is the *mesosystem*, which he described as a network of *microsystems* and interactions between those *microsystems.* These involve interactions between the family and school system, places of work, places of worship, and other community settings frequented by the individual and the family. Each of these systems has its own cultural norms and cultural identities. The third level of influence is the *exosystem*, which involves formal and informal social structures likely to influence directly or indirectly the *mesosystem* and the individuals within it, such as mass media; local, state, and national governments; and informal social networks. The final level is the *macrosystem,* which contains the laws, rules, and regulations that govern communities and societies as they determine the education, legal, economic, and political systems that influence the culture and behaviors of individuals and communities.

On the basis of the ecological model, behavior is viewed in terms of the person's adaptation to resources and circumstances in the environment, and it is the product of the ongoing interaction between individuals and their contexts (Levine, Perkins, & Perkins, 2005). Researchers have suggested adaptations of this model to examine specific content areas of interest to multicultural psychology, including Berry's (1994) ecological framework for cross-cultural psychology. Worthman (2010) provided a discussion of evolving models for cultural

psychology grounded in ecological theory. The models discussed by the author include Whiting's (1977) model for psychocultural research, which "explains cultural variation as a product of local contextual and structural conditions that shape experience, produce distinctive intrapsychic conflicts, drive cultural change, and consequently underlie cultural configurations" (p. 547). Whiting's model, according to Worthman, also stresses the ongoing interaction between nature and nurture across different levels of ecological analysis, emphasizing the relationship between those levels of analysis. A spinoff from Whiting's model is the model for developmental niche, proposed by Harkness and Super (1994), and the bioecocultural model (see Konner, 2002; Worthman, 2009). Another model analyzed by Worthman (2010) is the ecocultural theory proposed by Weisner (1997), which examines the influence of the daily environment and activity settings on psychosocial development. All of these models were developed to understand the complex context of child development within a sociocultural–ecological environment, paying particular attention to ongoing interactions between nurture and culture.

Counseling psychologists have suggested several adaptations to the ecological model. These consist of the work of Erez and Gati (2004), who include ecological levels of analysis from the individual to the global culture, and Neville and Mobley's (2001) ecological model of multicultural-counseling psychology processes. In essence, these models highlight the relationship and interactions among the individual, family, neighborhood, community, and the larger society as well as how the levels of analysis affect one another and help shape the norms, values, and behavioral patterns and preferences that govern the individual and define culture.

Ecological Concepts

From a community perspective, Kelly (1990, 2006) identified four ecological concepts of importance to research with multicultural populations. These include *population,* defined as a group of individuals that share a common predicament, common interests, or some common characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, race, social class, roles). The United States is becoming increasingly diverse, with 35% of the population coming from African American, Latino, Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander backgrounds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Latinos, for instance, are the largest minority group, representing 16.5% of the total population and more than 50 million people. The second concept is *community,* which involves a specified geographic or spatial area, such as a neighborhood, a school, places of worship, community organizations, and the like, composed of populations with different, similar, or overlapping interests. Ethnic groups and new immigrants, in the United States, tend to congregate in certain geographic areas and create their own communities with their unique boundaries, identities, and settings. The third concept is the *ecosystem,* which includes the larger community, beyond the geographic community of the individual, in addition to the immediate physical and social environment of the individual with its own norms, values, rules, customs, laws, and social norms that bind individuals together. For instance, those residing in a given community might find foods from their culture and access to cultural events that they value where they live; while others might find their ecosystem outside their geographic community in order to attend places of worship, school, and work or to participate in entertainment and cultural events. The last concept is the *biosphere,* which includes the larger world and global community. Researchers might look at economic and social policies in the biosphere, for instance, to explain patterns of migration to industrialized countries and global responses to social problems such as poverty or lack of access to food and clean water.

To further our understanding of the ecological model, specifically, the interactions between individuals and settings across levels of analysis, Kelly (1966) proposed four core ecological principles that apply to the study of multicultural community settings: interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation, and succession. These four principles are closely related to one another.

The first principle, *interdependence,* speaks to the relationship between the levels of the system. Trickett, Kelly, and Todd (1972) argued that ecological settings affect one another and that a change in one setting might influence other settings and their

relationships. For instance, an increase in enrollment of first-generation Latino immigrants in a school setting changes the relationships among other related systems and their interactions. The increase in Spanish-speaking children and families has multiple consequences across parts of the system (e.g., more Latino children go to the neighborhood school, which changes the demographic profile of the school) and changes the relationship between systems (e.g., information about a school event is sent home in Spanish, school hires bilingual teachers and personnel). Similar changes might be experienced by a community-based organization when the demographic profile of the geographic area they serve changes over time.

A second principle is the *cycling of resources*. Within systems, the exchange and utilization of resources is a constant reality. Such resources may include knowledge, skills, funds, material goods, space, equipment, and so forth. In the previous example, the school may decide to assign bilingual teachers to classes that enroll a high number of bilingual students and use bilingual personnel to engage with Spanish-speaking families. This exchange of resources might happen naturally as individuals use their skills to respond to demands in the environment. An immigrant from Mexico might choose to assist another parent with information and tips as the parent prepares for her first trip to Mexico, while also providing information to the Mexican parent about how the school system works in her district. Individuals in a given neighborhood and community constantly are affected by the concepts of interdependence and cycling of resources.

The third principle introduced by Kelly (1966) is *adaptation*. According to Trickett et al. (1972), adaptation addresses the ongoing interaction between individuals and the ecological environments in which they live, work, study, and play. This interaction is an ongoing, dynamic interplay between the individual and the environment. As the environment places demands on the individual, the individual adapts, and as the individual places demands on the environment, the environment adapts to changes (positively or negatively). For example, the school system might change as increased demand for bilingual services are placed on it and community agencies in the area may hire more bilingual and Latino personnel. Not all systems change in response to changes in the population, however. In the case of new Latino immigrants moving into a local neighborhood, social agencies might choose not to hire new bilingual or multicultural staff, maintaining the organization the same as before the new immigrants arrived. New residents may adapt to the lack of responses from the social service system. These adaptations, however, often are not easy or free of challenges and power struggles (see Balcazar et al., 2012), which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The last principle in Kelly's (1966) ecological model is *succession*. This concept acknowledges the fact that change is a constant reality for the environment and for the individuals within it. The other three principles, according to Trickett et al. (1972), need to be understood in the context of change succession. For instance, school systems might change how they do things to accommodate the increased enrollment of Latinos; Latino families may change how they relate to school personnel depending on the school personnel's command of Spanish or the way they address their children's needs. With the increase in Latino immigrants in certain areas, neighborhoods may respond by adding store signage in Spanish, new businesses such as restaurants or supermarkets may offer Latino goods. Some local residents may resist the change and move out of such neighborhoods, further changing the environment and the experiences of those within.

These four principles interface with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) levels of the social–ecological model. Interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation, and succession take place both within as well as across ecological levels. For example, individuals in transition may alter interdependencies between systems as they move from the family level of analysis to the school and community levels, as noted in the example of school children with limited English language skills. Resources may be exchanged across levels of analysis. As such, Kelly's (1966) four principles identify mechanism of interaction and change within and between the levels of analysis proposed by Bronfenbrenner.

The four principles identified by Kelly (1966) have important implications for the study of

community settings and the design of interventions as they are particularly relevant to those conducting research with multicultural populations. An ecological approach to community research emphasizes the ongoing interaction between individuals and their ecological settings, including interactions between social systems, researchers, and host communities (Kelly et al., 2000). The four principles of interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation, and succession also affect the maintenance and formation of culture as well as individuals' practices, values, behavioral preferences, occupations, norms, and traditions.

COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY CONTRIBUTIONS TO MULTICULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Community psychologists emphasize the study of individuals in their natural environments, interacting in their own settings and events. Community psychology has embraced appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism as part of its definition, principles, and theoretical approaches. Rappaport (1977) once said, "community psychology is an attempt to support every person's right to be different without risk of suffering material and psychological sanctions" (p. 1). Several principles have helped shape the field of community psychology. This section discusses those that also are embraced by, and closely related to, multicultural psychology.

Principles and Values of Community Psychology Relevant to Multiculturalism

The guiding principles and theory development in community psychology have contributed to multicultural psychology research, by emphasizing the influence of the ecological environment and the settings and systems in which individuals live and interact on a daily basis. In addition, community psychologists have focused their research and concept development on issues that impact individuals and groups experiencing oppression and marginalization (see Balcazar et al., 2012; Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009). Many of these groups happen to be migrant populations, individuals from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds—like African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders; migrant workers; gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals; low-income populations; individuals with disabilities; and other vulnerable populations.

A distinguishing feature of community psychologists' ideology is that we pay particular attention to marginalized and oppressed communities. Specifically, community psychology research has been guided by the values of (a) respect for diversity and multiculturalism; (b) empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities; and (c) the promotion of social change and social justice (e.g., see Levine et al., 2005, for other values such as sense of community and community collaboration). These values inform and are infused in multicultural psychology theory. What follows is a discussion of these three values and their contributions to multicultural psychology.

Respect for diversity and multiculturalism. Community psychologists recognize human diversity as a strength in any society. Their study of human diversity and multiculturalism has focused on themes like racial identity (Helms, 1994); acculturation, (Berry, 1994; Birman et al., 2005; García-Ramírez, de la Mata, Paloma, & Hernández-Plaza, 2011); oppression of disadvantaged groups (Balcazar et al., 2012; Prilleltensky, 2012; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994;); multilevel, community-based, culturally situated interventions (Schensul & Trickett, 2009); gender issues, such as feminism (Russo & Dabul, 1994); sexual identity (D'Augelli, 1994; Harper, Jernewall, & Zea, 2004); and community health (Lounsbury & Mitchell, 2009), among other themes. A common thread across these themes is the power imbalance between individuals who are oppressed and the people and systems that oppress them. These power imbalances typically result in instances of oppression and injustice. Prilleltensky (2012) affirmed that the role of community psychologists, as social scientists, is to find empirical evidence to document the injustice or to find ways to challenge it, to speak up, and to denounce it when we see it.

Community psychology's research on multicultural issues has expanded to include volumes dedicated to human diversity (Trickett et al., 1994) and

special issues on multicultural diversity and culture published in its official journal, the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. Some of the more recent special issues have been *Culture and Community Psychology* (Kral, Ramírez-García, Masood, Dutta, & Todd, 2011), *Stories of Diversity* (Bond & Harrel, 2006), and *Multi-Level Community-Based Culturally Situated Interventions* (Schensul & Trickett, 2009). In addition, multiple papers and chapters, impossible to enumerate here, have been published with culture at the center of the studies (e.g., see Balcazar, García-Iriarte, & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009; O'Donell, 2006; Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2009; Suarez-Balcazar, Kinney, Masi, Cassey, & Muhammad, 2005; Trickett, 2011). This focus emphasizes the conscientious choice of community psychologists to study oppressed and marginalized populations, with a strong recognition of the role that culture plays in determining the way some groups are discriminated against.

Empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities. Empowerment is conceptualized as the process by which individuals gain control over decisions that affect their lives (Fawcett et al., 1994; Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is viewed as both an individual and a psychological process (Zimmerman, 2000) as well as a group experience and process (Fawcett et al., 1994). From an ecological perspective, empowerment is exercised at different levels of change, including at the individual, family or kinship, organizational (school settings, community agencies, and faith-based groups), neighborhood, city, or broader society level (Fawcett et al., 1994).

Fawcett et al. (1994) argued that individual empowerment is contextual and can change over time and across settings. An example is an individual who is oppressed in his place of employment and who, in turn, oppresses his children and wife at home. At the mesosystem level, however, this same person may lack access to health care and other benefits and may be limited in finding a safe place to live or acquiring basic necessities for his family. His choices are restricted by his resources and sociopolitical position. Many individuals from diverse backgrounds and other vulnerable populations in this country have had a history of disempowerment; they are more likely to experience discrimination, to be unemployed, and to experience poverty (Balcazar et al., 2012).

Prilleltensky, Perkins, and Fisher (2003) proposed a conceptual model that merges ecological validity with the psychopolitical validity of the phenomena of interest. The model assumes that ecological research must attend to multiple levels of ecological analysis (i.e., individual, relational, and collective) and the dynamic context of capturing change over time to understand the relationships between power and wellness of any given group. According to Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005), the relationships of power can be examined by understanding conditions of *oppression* (e.g., collecting situational testimonies of social injustice) and by understanding efforts of *liberation* (e.g., the process of developing critical awareness and taking actions to overcome conditions of inequality and power asymmetry).

From a multicultural perspective, however, empowerment in itself may be a culturally bound construct. Riger (1993) argued that empowerment denotes Western values and beliefs consonant with such concepts as individualism, self-determination, and self-control, which are not necessarily congruent with non-Western values of collectivism, interdependence, and collective well-being. Yet, Prilleltensky (2012) posited that through a combination of collective efforts (empowerment efforts) and changing social and political circumstances, people move from oppression to liberation and thriving. Empowerment, then, is an individual or collective process and a prominent feature of community psychologists' intervention efforts.

Social change and social justice. Social change to promote social justice is a central value to community psychologists. Much research has been dedicated to designing and implementing community interventions that promote social equality and social justice (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Wolff, 2010). Social justice encompasses the political, social, and economic rights of individuals in a given society (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002). According to Austin (2001), "the central assumption of the rights paradigm is that every person can make certain claims based solely on their humanness" (p. 184). Prilleltensky (2012) has argued that just societies

provide for their members and meet the basic needs of all. He posited that people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or any other characteristic, have the right to have their needs met. Multicultural and diverse individuals, low-income individuals, recent immigrants, migrant workers, and individuals with a disability, however, are not always allowed to make such claims (Braveman & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009). Strong evidence suggests that many of these individuals experience discrimination in their everyday lives, from seeking services to accessing goods (Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor-Ritzler, & Keys, 2010; Suarez-Balcazar & Kinney, 2006). Evidence also suggests that racism and discrimination are some of the factors contributing to widespread health disparities (Brach & Fraserirector, 2000; Braithwaite, Taylor, & Treadwell, 2009).

Community-based participatory research with multicultural populations (e.g., Jason et al., 2004) has focused on topics that inform understanding of exosystems and macrosystems. A related topic is oppression. Oppression results from asymmetric power relations shaped by domination and subordination. Prilleltensky and Gonick (1994) asserted that the external oppression and deprivation of objective and subjective goods often is accompanied by manipulation of information designed to implant in subordinated groups self-deprecating views. Most unfortunate, these psychological manipulations often succeed, and oppressed groups internalize perceptions of inferiority, accepting with resignation their "destiny" in the social structure of society. This process also is recognized as *hegemony*.

Prilleltensky (2012) argued that oppression curtails self-determination, suppresses voice, and perpetuates injustice. Prilleltensky and Gonick (1994) acknowledged that there are many kinds of oppression, but they focus on two: political and psychological. They defined *political oppression* as the creation of material, legal, military, economic, and other social barriers to the fulfillment of self-determination, justice, and democratic participation. Political oppression is the result of the actual use of power by dominating agents to advance their own interests at the expense of people or groups in positions of relative powerlessness. They conceptualized *psychological oppression* as the internalized view of self as negative and undeserving of resources or participation in societal affairs. This negative perception, they claimed, is the result of affective, behavioral, cognitive, linguistic, and cultural mechanisms designed to solidify political domination and social control.

Research on social justice from a community psychology perspective has included areas, such as social justice and the family (Brighouse & Swift, 2008), juvenile justice and education (Repucci, Meyer, & Kostelnick, 2011), empowering settings (Aber, Maton, & Seidman, 2011; Maton, 2008), and resilience (Tebes & Irish, 2000), among others. Community psychologists also have used an ecological approach to explain system changes in conditions of social injustice that multicultural populations often encounter (see Foster-Fishman & Behrens, 2007, special issue on systems change). Community psychology researchers play an important role in promoting the study of social change and social justice from an ecological perspective. Furthermore, they are some of the strongest proponents of collaborative approaches to research, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR), which facilitates the involvement of marginalized and oppressed populations in the research process. CBPR is widely utilized in the field and provides multicultural populations with a voice and opportunities for action to identify, articulate, and address their concerns (Jason et al., 2004; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, & Lewis, 2005).

Mankowski, Galvez, and Glass (2011) presented an analysis of the interdisciplinary linkages between community psychology and cross-cultural psychology, highlighting the points of intersection between the two fields. According to the authors, there are a number of commonalities in terms of theoretical and research approaches. One commonality is the appreciation for human diversity and emphasis on the environment and the sociocultural context in which individuals perform their daily activities. The authors argued, however, that the two fields have not yet made full use of each other's conceptual frameworks and theories. Although cross-cultural psychology has focused more on using interpersonal and contextual theories, community psychology has focused more on empowerment and ecological theories (Mankowski et al., 2011).

An Exemplar of Community Psychology Theory and Research: The Role of the Ecological Model in the Conceptualizations and Measurement of Cultural Competence

Researchers have argued that one strategy for addressing discrimination and oppression, as well as beginning to address service disparities, is to enhance cultural competency among service providers (Balcazar et al., 2010). One of the shortcomings of the current cultural competence literature is the conceptualization and measurement of the construct itself (Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2009). In a systematic review of the literature, the authors identified 18 cultural competence models (e.g., see Glockshuber, 2005; Hart, Hall, & Henwood, 2003; Jezewski & Sotnik, 2005; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). All of the models include cognitive and behavioral components, with a few attending to contextual and ecological elements. The cognitive components emphasize awareness and knowledge acquisition. The behavioral components emphasize skills development, such as being able to engage culturally diverse clients in a genuine accepting manner. Only five of the models explicitly address learning about the context, or ecology, of the multicultural individual. On the basis of the state of the literature on cultural competency models, the authors of this chapter found that the process of developing cultural competence among health professionals and service providers can be explained with three interrelated factors: cognitive (i.e., increasing critical awareness and knowledge of diverse cultures), behavioral (i.e., empathy and developing effective communication skills), and organizational or contextual (i.e., support for cultural diversity, including organizational policies and resources allocated to fostering diversity). Most models of cultural competency in the literature involve person-related variables but do not necessarily include an organizational or contextual (ecological) component (for more information about these models, see Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, et al., 2009; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2011).

The model developed by Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, et al. (2009) also served as the basis for the development of an instrument to address a gap in the literature. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2011) reviewed the literature on scales and cultural-competency assessment instruments and identified 13 scales, nine of which included psychometric properties and were validated—three with practitioner samples, three with mixed samples of practitioners and students, and three with student-only populations (e.g., see Campinha-Bacote, 1999; Sodowsky, 1996).

The most common domains measured in the 13 scales included cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. Although these are essential components for understanding, conceptualizing, and measuring cultural competence, recent studies have found the importance of environmental and contextual features in promoting cultural competence among practitioners (Taylor-Ritzler et al., 2008). The only measure to include context-related items was Goode's (2004) cultural-competency self-assessment checklist. This instrument includes a subscale on the physical environment, materials, and resources of the practitioner's setting. Goode, however, did not mention any psychometric or validation data of the checklist. Most models of cultural competence have not been tested empirically, and they focus on training professionals in *what they should know*, while failing to demonstrate how *to do what they know* to achieve real changes in their practices, organizations, and communities (Hansen et al., 2006).

Weaver (2008) proposed that the study of cultural competence be carried out on the basis of three critical issues: (a) the *perspective of strength*, or the notion that citizens have at their disposal their own resources, values, and strategies to tackle vital challenges in such a way that researchers and practitioners should facilitate its use; (b) the need to help professionals learn to think beyond their cultural perspectives and assume that the differences between "them and others" lie not in the "others" but rather in the relationship itself; and (c) efforts to address the *power asymmetries* among community members, primarily resulting from class differences and experiences of oppression.

Community psychology permits a response to the above critical issues by way of (a) redefining *the roles of culture and contexts*, observing the relationship between individuals and their local communities as elements intrinsic to the notion of culture;

(b) developing *culturally sensitive research*, emphasizing its ecological orientation with the purpose of developing useful tools that facilitate and promote action and system change (Fostier, 2010; García-Ramírez et al., 2011; Kral et al., 2011; Mankowski, Galvez, & Glass, 2011; Paloma, García-Ramírez, de la Mata, & Associacion AMAL-Andaluza, 2010; Trickett, 2011; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010); and (c) implementing *empowerment interventions* designed to address power inequalities and remove oppression and injustices (e.g., Balcazar et al., 2012; Fawcett et al.,1994). With this aim in mind, we consider three fundamental steps to the process of promoting cultural competence from an ecological perspective: (a) the need to *redefine the concept of culture* and the role that it plays in the construction of professional identities, (b) the need to understand *power asymmetries* among the groups that form multicultural societies, and (c) the need to *adopt an ecological perspective* that addresses the challenges of extending cultural competence to organizations and communities.

Redefining culture. Cultural competence has been viewed as an ongoing process that includes a combination of components (i.e., attitudes, knowledge, and abilities) that can be learned by any researcher or practitioner. This approach, however, attributes the lack of competency to the user rather than to the interaction. At the root of the matter, we find a limited view of culture that avoids reference to the collection of activities and practices that people carry out in their daily lives, which are measures of their vision of the world, integrated patterns of behavior, tools of communication, customs, common narratives, and institutional policies. We support the view that culture does not provide individuals with a linear identity but rather with a complex combination of interwoven identities that create complex and subtle dynamics of interaction between groups (García-Ramírez et al., 2011; Pettigrew, 2008; Phalet & Kosic, 2006). Being culturally competent requires being effective in contexts of diversity that defy our own cultural comfort (Trickett, 2009).

Understanding the asymmetries of power. Traditionally, the concept of inequality has been used to refer to structural differences in opportunities, services, and outcomes, especially those related to race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Stronks, 2002). Nevertheless, to define inequity in terms of unequal relations also has problematic consequences. Inequality implies the adoption of standards that a dominant group establishes in the name of all groups. Such norms and standards often ignore the context and values of minorities or immigrants. Social standards put in place by the dominant group often reflect one set of values (i.e., White, middle-class). The dominant cultural group typically gains and maintains its privileges, institutionalizing a hegemonic culture that restricts opportunities for immigrants or minority groups and degrades their cultural values and traditions. This fosters and reinforces xenophobic and racist attitudes among service providers (Freire, 1972; Gustafson, 2005; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Martín-Baró, 1986; Weaver, 2008). Prilleltensky (2008) has proposed the term *psychopolitical validity* to respond to the need for theories and methodologies that explain and capture the role of oppressive intergroup relations in human suffering and combine the impact of political and psychological power in the promotion of effective social change. Cultural competence should be observed as a process that enables professionals and practitioners to collaborate in an effective manner with culturally diverse users in the just and equal distribution of community resources.

Adopting an ecological perspective. Multicultural transformation of service providers and professionals implies deep changes at multiple levels. Nevertheless, we have failed to develop models that are able to address the interrelation between these levels (Kelly, 1994; Sue, 2001). The community psychology approach emphasizes the *individuals-in-context* relationship, highlighting the different ecological levels as contexts of competence and highlighting cultural competence as the capacity to evaluate and transform the context and oneself in accordance with the community's fabric—their history, norms, and cultural narratives (Trickett, 2009). In this model, we assume that cultural competence should enable professionals to efficiently carry out organizational changes that facilitate access for all citizens, empowering multicultural citizens to effectively

engage and transform social systems (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Owusu, 2003).

All of these elements could facilitate institutional transformation and also lead to the conversion of individuals into multicultural citizens. Community organizations—as empowering multicultural settings—have a role to play in empowering multicultural individuals because they provide accessible services that meet the needs of local residents regardless of race or ethnicity (Ingleby, 2006). Figure 29.1 summarizes the values of community psychology, the community psychologist's response to oppression, and the components of cultural competence that can help transform existing institutions and service-providing agencies into empowering multicultural settings.

Our vision of cultural competence allows us to study community organizations (e.g., social service organizations, volunteer associations, faith-based organizations) as *empowering multicultural settings* (Maton, 2008; Maton & Brodsky, 2011; Paloma et al., 2010) with several characteristics:

(*a*) ***Adopt a multicultural mission***, embrace equality and diversity as organizational values, recognize diversity of origin and the cultural and linguistic experiences of the individuals they serve, and assume models of services that are congruent with the culture of the members and guided by the values of the people they serve.

(*b*) ***Adapt services and organizational processes*** (policies, standards, and procedures) to meet the needs of the multicultural collective group; share evidence and best practices that integrate knowledge and the view of multicultural users of services; and develop evidence-based practices.

(*c*) ***Promote horizontal and reciprocal relationships*** by including users of services in the decision-making process of the organizations; establishing strong partnerships with universities; and fostering the exchange of ideas and multicultural events among multicultural communities, community settings, professionals, and practitioners.

(*d*) ***Foster capacity to engage in new roles*** by encouraging diversity in human resources and hiring multicultural staff; identifying new roles for multicultural populations, such as cultural mediators, spiritual and cultural healers, community gatekeepers, and volunteers; and train them as service providers.

(*e*) ***Promote leadership*** among professionals and community members who are pluralistic, multicultural individuals, capable of equally representing the needs and views of all constituents and relating with ease to multicultural communities.

(*f*) ***Promote systems change*** by focusing on pursuing long-term social change, seeking to maintain the quality of services, and protecting changes to policies and practices that support multicultural populations.

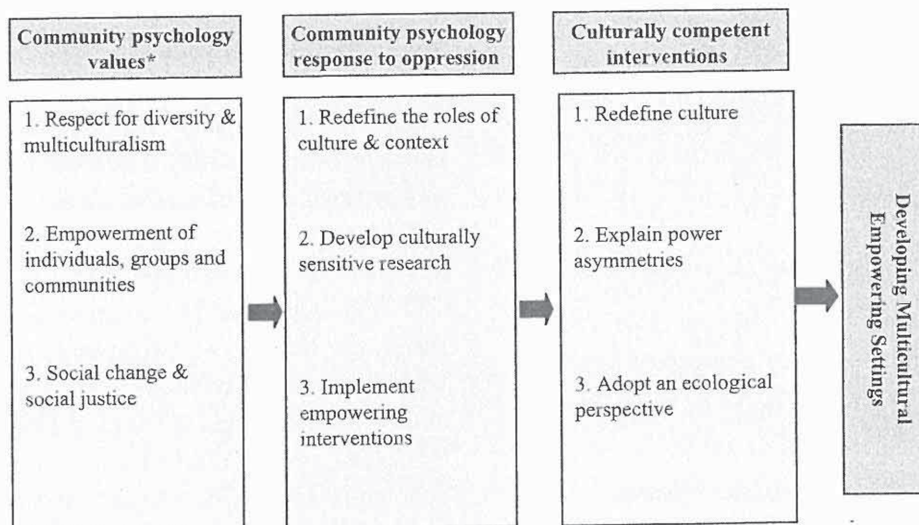

FIGURE 29.1. Development of multicultural empowering settings.

We have proposed an ecological framework for integrating multicultural and marginalized individuals in an empowerment process that requires the complex transformation of their identities and the creation of multicultural identities as part of a multicultural society, which could lead them to become active members of society—able to engage politically in the construction of a new, more equal society (García-Ramírez et al., 2011). This process of restructuring organizations and transforming them into empowering settings implies a new vision of society by the members of the agency or group and the users of services, which demands critical reflection and transformative action. We need to challenge traditional positions of privilege and social domination, reconstructing social and personal resources, while developing new ways of service delivery from a perspective of social justice and equality. Empowering settings can redistribute power to improve people's well-being. They can facilitate equal access and opportunities, acceptance of multiculturalism, commitment and mutual responsibility, psychological well-being, self-control, and competence and autonomy (García-Ramírez et al., 2011).

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: CONTRIBUTIONS OF ECOLOGICAL THEORY TO MULTICULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY FROM A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Although ecological theory was not developed in the field of community psychology, community researchers have used it extensively as their foundation for research on diversity and multiculturalism. Ecological and community perspectives have made significant contributions to multicultural psychology research. Specifically, an ecological perspective calls for attention to different levels of analysis in research. A community perspective, as noted, seeks to assess how the values of diversity, empowerment, and social change interact with the various ecological levels to inform multicultural research. Following is a discussion of the application of the ecological model. In Table 29.1, we synthesize the

TABLE 29.1

Community Psychology Values and Concepts to Promote Across Ecological Levels of Analysis

	Ecological levels				
Community psychology values	**Individual-level microsystem**	**Family-level microsystem**	**Community mesosystem**	**Societal-level exosystem**	**Policy-level macrosystem**
Diversity	Behavioral preferences	Economic migration	Multicultural dialogue	Promote the value of diversity	Immigration reform
	Personal values	Multigenerational family living conditions	Tolerance and conflict resolution	Promote immigrant values	
	Personal beliefs	Respect for cultural differences	Differential treatment, prejudice, and discrimination	Equality	
		Family traditions, rituals, and norms			
Empowerment	Personal empowerment	Conflict resolution	Community organizing	Justice	Equal rights
	Sense of entitlement	Protection against violence	Democratic participation	Liberation	Equal opportunities
Social change and social justice	Overcoming personal oppression	Rights of gay couples	Promoting equal access to jobs and services	Challenging hegemony	Economic justice and equality
	Promoting social participation	Support for single-parent families		Challenging oppression	

interaction between ecological levels of analysis and some of the principles described in this chapter. In each cell, we identify factors of interest to multicultural psychology from an ecological–community perspective.

At the individual level, people are entering community settings with a set of characteristics that include race, gender, sexual orientation, level of cultural mistrust, level of acculturation in the case of immigrant populations, personal experience with community settings (e.g., faith-based organizations, schools, community agencies), specific needs, personal beliefs and norms, traditions, and behavioral preferences. In the case of minorities or refugees, for instance, individuals might have a history of oppression, persecution, and sometimes trauma.

At the microsystem level, several systems influence the individual, such as the family, which has been the focus of community research. The family has its own values, ethnic and linguistic background, beliefs and traditions, and behavioral preferences. The individual and the family are likely to enter critical settings, such as schools, service agencies, and community-based organizations, each with its own set of values and practices, which might be completely foreign to new immigrants or clash with the values and norms of different multicultural populations.

At the mesosystem level, there are interactions between the individual, the family, the school system, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations. Interactions between the individual and the family with these complex systems can be smooth when needs are met and expectations are clear, but they also can be oppressive from the experience of multicultural populations. This often is the case when there is a power asymmetry among the groups. Community-based organizations, in particular, may share a patronizing set of values and may continue cycles of oppression and marginalization (Balcazar et al., 2012). In the relationships between these microsystems (family, schools, community organizations), it is necessary to consider the role of asymmetrical power relationships in explaining marginalization, which is well documented in community psychology research with multicultural populations.

The ecosystem level also includes the environment in which these interactions are taking place, such as the broader community and neighborhoods. The values of diversity, choice, equality, justice, and liberation become central to promoting societal transformation. Communities need to challenge the oppression experienced by many immigrant and minority populations. In many urban areas with large concentrations of multicultural populations, immigrants live in low-income housing and often experience discrimination in their day-to-day living (Suarez-Balcazar & Kinney, 2006). Cultural factors of the community are complex and not necessarily homogeneous among all residents of a given community. These factors might include the power relationships between the members of the community and service providers, schools, and other organizations or settings encountered by the individual; the differences in cultural identity; sociopolitical and social-class differences; language issues; immigration status and acculturation level of community residents; and the community's ethnic traditions, belief systems, behavioral preferences, and spiritual and religious practices (Berry 1994; Montero, 2009).

The macrosystem level includes national or state policies that affect multicultural populations, such as immigration policies. The current immigration laws adapted by states like Alabama and Arizona have resulted in increased racial profiling by police and increases in discrimination and persecution. Access to resources and employment may affect migration to specific states and regions that may discriminate against newcomers while setting up patterns of resistance to change and asymmetric relationships.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND RESEARCH

Despite the vast amount of research on multicultural populations available in community psychology from an ecological perspective, several issues need further study. First, we need research that better conceptualizes power relationships and power asymmetry between immigrant and vulnerable multicultural groups and those in the dominant or host community. How do these power relationships

change as socioeconomic status, level of education, and income become more homogeneous? We also need to better understand the experiences of oppression and power asymmetry among individuals from their own perspectives as they navigate through different levels of ecological analysis.

Although community psychologists have conducted volumes of research on ecological interventions designed to empower multicultural populations, more research is needed on strategies to create the capacity to respond and move away from oppression to liberation for multicultural populations experiencing this oppression.

The mainstream multicultural psychology is focused on evidence-based practices assigning a passive role to participants. This issue hides the presumption that the objective of multicultural psychology research is to find and disseminate "magic bullet" interventions that ought to be applicable to a large number of people and communities. But a global and multicultural society requires the quest for new knowledge (new tools and new frameworks) and a new way of inquiring, taking into account how target groups want to be defined, how target groups want to define their participation and their issues, in which way and at what time target groups want to confront their issues, what kind of services they want to receive and from whom, and how target groups define a successful or failed outcome. In consequence, our challenge is to develop new best practices and processes focusing on empowerment and multiculturalism. This task requires empowering ourselves as researchers and becoming multicultural beings. New frameworks, new methodologies, and new alliances are required to confront successfully the future of marginalized communities. On the basis of the ecological–community psychology approach discussed in this chapter, in future research with multicultural populations we could do the following:

- Study the structural and symbolic dynamics of power and privilege that operate within and upon these communities and stakeholders.
- Study how oppressed individuals acquire awareness of their capacity to transform their own social reality as well as develop strategies for organizing and identifying the capacities and skills required to participate actively in the process of addressing their needs.
- Identify culturally appropriate strategies for how practitioners and researchers can effectively engage minority communities and gain their trust.
- Learn how to promote community members as leaders of their own self-help initiatives.
- Disseminate strategies that work when conducting research in collaboration with multicultural populations. Also, disseminate the results of research studies and promote evidence-based strategies.

Collaboration is not only indispensable for enriching the knowledge base but also necessary to disseminate the findings. Collaborative research is an antidote against academic arrogance; it is based on sharing different traditions and on accepting the contribution and knowledge of community members. Potential benefits of collaboration for our discipline are increased knowledge, learning about and utilizing new research designs, development of new methodologies and theories, building capacity for tackling complex social issues from multiple perspectives, and improving the legitimacy of the social sciences.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that an ecological approach can contribute to theory and research in multicultural psychology. Individual and group behaviors, norms, values, and traditions are intrinsically intertwined with the environments and settings that individuals encounter in their daily lives. The multiple levels of ecological analysis and the social systems in each level constantly interact and affect the cultural identity of all individuals.

Community psychology has contributed to our understanding of multicultural psychology as it relates to individuals from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds experiencing discrimination, oppression, segregation, and power differentials from the dominant groups. Future research needs to better integrate the ways in which ecological theory informs our understanding of multiculturalism. More research needs to be undertaken using an ecological approach to understand contextual factors

that affect multicultural interactions and help create responses to oppression when present. Specifically, we need to further discern the contextual factors that support and encourage multiculturalism and those factors that do not.

The complexity of ensuring relevance in multicultural research (communication issues, different concepts of well-being, different traditions of family, care, different risks) puts in evidence that working at multiple levels of analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective is critical. Multidisciplinary collaboration will help us develop interventions and comprehensive tools capable of improving the real conditions of multicultural populations interacting in multiple community settings and advancing theories for a better understanding of real and natural contexts within diverse communities. Everyone is invited to the table.

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