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CULTURE AND ECOLOGY OF LATINOS ON THE GREAT PLAINS: AN INTRODUCTION

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The topic of *culture* is relevant when focusing on Latinos on the Great Plains. It is evident that Latinos, both as individuals and as group members, exhibit various dimensions of culture in their day-to-day lives. What becomes problematic is how culture is defined and/or operationalized in assessing the Latino experience.

Several definitions of culture serve to demonstrate that culture is one of the most difficult terms to describe. One of the earliest definitions comes from E. B. Tylor who perceived culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor [1871] 1958:42). Linton suggested that culture means the “total social heredity of mankind” (Linton 1936:78), and Herskovits viewed culture as “the man-made part of the environment” (Herskovits 1948:17). Paradoxically, these definitions of culture serve to place culture in historical perspective and exemplify the changing and dynamic aspects of culture (e.g., notice the reference to “man” in these early discussions).

Whereas some researchers simply do not consider culture in their research and theories, others, who do incorporate the concept of culture and

cultural differences into their work, often ignore or fail to identify the *specific* aspects of culture and related variables that are thought to influence behavior (Betancourt and Lopez 1993). Lonner and Malpass (1994) also discuss how the way of treating the idea of culture is so pervasive, and is used by researchers so automatically, that much care should be taken to *explain* culture rather than assume we know how it works. It is in the details where the precise and interesting meaning of culture resides. Culture, therefore, is analogous to knowing the *rules of the game*.

There exist "core cultural ideas" (Markus and Kitayama 1994), that is, culturally defined and promulgated issues of concern within a group. All institutions and practices within a culture orient the individual to these core ideas. Core cultural ideas are likely to be highly salient to the individual because one is constantly exposed to them. However, at the same time, it must be recognized that this occurs on three levels: the individual, the group, and the institutional. It is essential to emphasize the multidimensional nature of culture when focusing on Latinos. Additionally, although culture shapes social behavior, ecology also plays an instrumental and important role.

To adequately address the question of what is culture, it is necessary to distinguish culture from ecology. Ecology reflects the physical environment and structure of one's context. For example, the household structure of a family (e.g., two-parent household, one-parent household, extended family members) is a part of the individual's ecology. In contrast, culture reflects the dynamic interplay among the common attitudes, beliefs, customs, norms, ideologies (sometimes formalized as laws) and values of a specific ecology. Culture has been deemed by some scholars as an "invisible" construct because we often take for granted our awareness of our culture (Greenfield and Suzuki 1998). Indeed, theorists have often distinguished between "implicit" and "explicit" culture. Explicit culture are those aspects of the culture that have been formalized (e.g., laws or in educational textbooks). For example, commonly held beliefs about the appropriateness of clothing (i.e., fads) can be construed as part of one's implicit culture. In contrast, written school policies that define what is considered inappropriate school attire reflects explicit culture. The distinction between culture and ecology is ambiguous because culture is embedded in ecology.

Although culture and ecology overlap, the usefulness of acknowledging the link between these constructs is exemplified when conducting research on cultural groups. Bronfenbrenner (1986) presented a model that helps to summarize the multiple dimensions of an individual's ecology (*see*

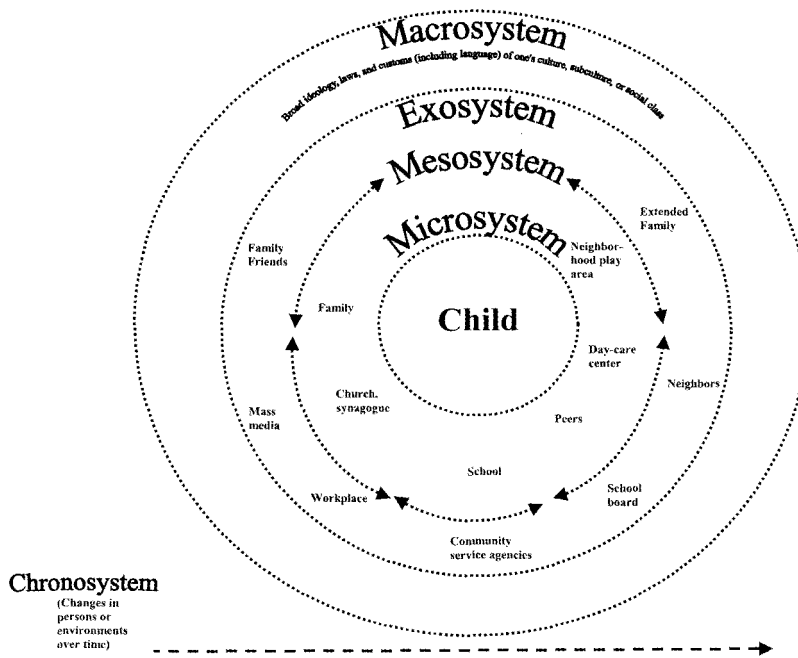


Figure 1. A modified social ecology model of development (adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1986).

Fig. 1). According to his social ecology model, individuals are embedded in system levels that impact one's development. The system levels are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. There are variables within each of these system levels. Furthermore, there are reciprocal influences in the variables between the system levels. For example, the child may impact the microsystem and variables within the microsystem may impact the child.

The microsystem consists of influences in the person's immediate environment and may include the child's school (e.g., teachers, class structure, school size), family, church, and peer group. For purposes of studying Latino culture, this system level contains a number of important developmental influences. For example, there is considerable evidence on the influence of family and the quality of parent-child relationships on Latino children's development. Some researchers have shown that Latinos strongly endorse connectedness with family members and respect for authority and

elders—characteristics of societies that reflect a collective/interdependent orientation (see Cocking 1994; Knight et al. 1995; Williams 1991). Indeed, children with Latino ethnic origins have been shown to exhibit greater cooperative behaviors, and less competitive behaviors, than children with European-American backgrounds (Carlo et al. in press). These values may conflict with educational institutions in individualistic/independent societies that promote critical thinking (i.e., question authority figures), autonomy, individual competitiveness, and material productivity. Furthermore, because Latino children are socialized by their family to respect authority figures (the concept of “*respeto*”) and to show good manners (e.g., not interrupt others while they speak, humility; concepts related to “*bien educado*”), these children may present themselves as less assertive and participate less in classroom discussions. This, in turn, may evoke negative evaluations from teachers.

The interconnections between the microsystem variables reflect the mesosystem level. This second layer of influence acknowledges the complexity of influence on the child. Examples of variables in this level include the relations between the school and the family and the relations between church and the family. Because Latino families often value religion and promote a close relationship to church (see Arbelaez 2002), there are ample opportunities for the family to be influenced in such matters as moral teachings by the teachings and closeness to their church. These teachings, in turn, may be transmitted to the Latino child. Moreover, Latino children’s academic achievements may be influenced by the quality of the relationship between the child’s parents and his or her teachers. One possible consequence is that, unless parents and teachers become acquainted with each other, the Latino child’s academic performance may be compromised.

The third layer of Bronfenbrenner’s social ecology model is the exosystem. This system level consists of contexts that the child might not directly interact with, or control, but which may nevertheless influence the child’s development. For example, some communities in the Great Plains region have a substantial, and others have a relatively small, proportion of Latino residents. Prior research has shown that minority children who strongly identify with their culture of origin tend to evidence well being and positive adjustment compared to minority children who strongly reject their culture of origin (McCloyd 1990). One might expect that Latino children who reside in communities whose Latino population is relatively large might be better capable of retaining a strong sense of ethnic identity with their culture of origin because their peer group and community institutions

may tolerate and reward beliefs and behaviors consistent with their Latino roots. Latino children from these communities may be expected to have a positive developmental trajectory as compared to Latino children from communities with a small proportion of Latino residents.

The macrosystem reflects the broadest aspect of one's environment and consists of societal laws, ideology, and customs of the culture (or subculture). This system layer is of utmost importance to understand the impact of majority culture on Latinos (or any other minority group). The beliefs, norms, expectations, attitudes, and ideologies (often reflected through formal laws) of the majority culture are embedded in this layer and transmitted through societal institutions (e.g., schools). For immigrant (or migrant) families, positive adjustment to their new community requires learning these influences. One critical aspect of this layer entails learning the language of the majority culture. Language is important because it is the primary tool used to acquire the culture knowledge scripts needed to adapt and because it can be used to effectively communicate the needs of the Latino family to others. It is important to note that many of the customs of the culture are informal, not written, and not easily accessible. This can make the adaptation process arduous for many Latino families, unless the families have proper community support.

In addition to the four basic ecological system levels, Bronfenbrenner (1986) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) note that the variables within the system levels are in constant flux over time. He suggests that it is important to consider the temporal dimension of this change and refers to this as the chronosystem. The importance of the chronosystem to understanding Latinos (or any other culture group) is best exemplified by the concept of acculturation.

The psychological and behavioral adaptation process that occurs when two culture groups are engaged is referred to as acculturation (Berry 1994; Marin and Marin 1991). Acculturation is the adaptive change of one culture group that is embedded in an ecology where a majority culture group exists. For example, Latinos in the Great Plains region may acculturate to the majority culture group (European Americans). However, acculturation gradually takes place over time and would be considered a variable that reflects the chronosystem. Thus, although acculturation can be considered a microsystem variable that reflects the interplay between the individual and their community, it is also a variable that is dynamic and whose status is subject to change over time. Operationally, the acknowledgment of the dynamic aspect of culture variables such as acculturation requires that we

assess acculturation over time (using longitudinal study designs). Furthermore, it requires that researchers limit their interpretations of the influence of acculturative processes to those assessment periods. Nonetheless, the measurement of acculturation at a specific point in time (i.e., acculturative status) may be useful for obtaining information, especially if one can obtain wide variability on this variable to examine acculturative status differences among Latinos.

Analogously, acculturation can have important implications for the development and implementation of intervention programs and for policy decision making. For example, research shows that Latinos are disproportionately at risk for dropping out of school relative to other ethnic groups in the United States and the Great Plains region (Carranza et al. 2000). As a consequence, a number of intervention programs have been designed to address this concern. However, there is other research that suggests that educational achievement among Latinos is associated with acculturative status (*see* Bernal et al. 1995). Researchers have shown that the risk for dropouts from school among Latinos are highest for those Latinos who have recently immigrated to the United States. Thus, although intervention programs aimed at Latino youths in schools might be useful, their usefulness might be enhanced by developing programs targeted at more recent Latino immigrants or at Latinos who have yet to acculturate to majority US society (*see* Davis 2002, for an excellent historical review of Latinos in Central Nebraska). It should be noted that acculturation is a two-way process such that the rate of acculturation for a Latino individual is strongly influenced by the majority culture and ecology in which he or she is embedded. That is, it may be as important to examine structural or institutional barriers to acculturation as it is to examine the Latino's desire or impetus to acculturate when developing social policies or intervention programs.

Summary and Conclusions

The preceding discussion of the distinction between culture and ecology and the layers of the Latinos' ecology have important implications for researchers, practitioners, and program developers, and policy makers.

1. The dynamic complexity of culture lends research on this issue to be fraught with challenges and difficulties. First, given that the most common measures utilized by researchers were developed to use with non-Latino populations, there is a need to develop

assessment instruments that will be valid to use with Latinos. This necessitates an emphasis on measurement development research (including the possible use of focus groups). Second, more sophisticated research designs will be needed to adequately examine the issues related to Latinos that are of interest. For example, as mentioned previously, longitudinal designs are needed to investigate culture-related processes that change over time (e.g., assimilation). Finally, there is a need to promote and facilitate (e.g., provide incentives, foster collaboration) more research on Latinos (and other minority groups) in the Great Plains region. This is especially important in the Great Plains region because relatively more research on Latinos exists in other regions of the United States (e.g., Southwest, East and West Coasts) (see Carranza et al. 2000, for a brief overview of research in the Great Plains region). Following the earlier discussion of the impact of ecology, we cannot assume that research findings on Latinos from other parts of the United States apply to Latinos from the Great Plains region.

2. Policy makers, practitioners and program developers need to be sensitive to the differences among ethnic and racial groups, as well as to the differences within ethnic and racial groups (see Borrayo 2002 and Maldonado-Duran et al. 2002, for excellent discussions of the health care challenges facing Latinos). Both within- and between-group differences are important to consider when developing prevention or treatment intervention programs. Although there are many commonalities among the different Latino subgroups, the heterogeneity among Latinos spans across differences in language usage and preferences, acculturative status differences, gender, and SES, among many other factors. The commonalities may have more to do with their perceived social status by the majority culture rather than with the culture of origin. That is, Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Nicaraguans, and other Latino groups may be viewed and treated in similar ways by the majority culture, yet individuals from those cultures may view and behave in ways that distinguish themselves from one another.

This is not to suggest that all successful programs and policies must necessarily be culture specific. In many cases, there are enough commonalities among the ethnic and racial groups (stemming from their common

social status and power) that effective programs and policies can be developed to assist individuals from many Latino groups. However, rigorous research (including program evaluations) can help guide policy makers, practitioners, and program developers when it becomes necessary to modify and improve an existing program or policy.

The special issue of the *Great Plains Research* journal presents excellent examples of the type of research and discussion that is needed to assist the ongoing integration and development of Latinos in the various communities on the Great Plains. We hope the issues raised in both issues of the journal (Vol. 10, no. 2 and Vol. 12, no. 1) will spur additional research and interest on the topics. We would encourage readers to use the articles in classes, workshops, and seminars to stimulate discussion and debate with the common goal of reaching a shared mutual understanding and to enhance the quality of life for all individuals in our communities.

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