Culture and Adolescent Development

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Introduction

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System

Bronfenbrenner's Structure of Environment
Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory is apropos to advancing the Cultural Eco-System Model. The Ecological Theory espoused by Urie Bronfenbrenner included five environmental systems ranging from fine-grained inputs of direct interactions with social agents to broad-based inputs of culture. It is one of the first early theories that examined the cultural overlay to development of individuals. This theory looks at the child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form his/her environment. Bronfenbrenner's theory defines complex "layer" of environment, each having an effect on a child's development. The interaction between factors in the child's maturing biology, his/her immediate family/community environment, and the social landscape fuels and steers his/her development. Changes or conflict in any one layer will ripple throughout other layers. To study one's development then, we must look not only at the individual and his/her immediate environment, but also the interaction of the larger environment as well. The five systems are: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem.

Microsystem
The microsystem is the layer closest to the child and contains the structures with which the child has direct contact. The microsystem encompasses the relationships and interactions a child has with his/her immediate surroundings. Structures in the microsystem include family, school, neighborhood, or childcare environments. At this level, relationships have impact in two directions – both away and towards the child. Bronfenbrenner calls these bi-directional influences. The interaction of structures within a layer and interactions of structures between

layers is key to this theory. At the microsystem level, bi-directional influences are strongest and have the greatest impact on the child. This is where culture becomes entrenched into the lives of children. However, it is equally important to note interactions at outer levels can still impact the inner structures.

Mesosystem

This layer provides the connection between the structures of the child's microsystem. More importantly, the mesosystem refers to the connections and relationships that exit between two or more microsystems. For example, how a child handles the relationship between his/her parents and his/her teacher. Cultural influences remain strong in this system, but they also may become more fluid as cultural conversations may change between and within the systems with the emergence of new entities.

Exosystem

This layer defines the larger society or setting in which the child does not function directly, but still experiences decisions and events that affect him or her indirectly. This structure in this layer impact the child's development by interacting with some structure in his/her microsystem. For example, there has been a change in the parent's work schedule, and this impacts the child because there may be less time for parent-child interaction. The child may not be directly involved at this level, but he/she does feel the positive or negative forces involved with the interaction with his/her own system. The child now has an experience with "invisible" cultures that create visible effects on living.

Macrosystem

This layer may be considered the outermost layer in a child's environment. The macrosystem is the overarching institutions, practices, patterns of beliefs, cultural values, customs, and laws that characterize society as a whole and take the smaller micro-, meso-, and exosystems into account. The effects of larger principles defined by the macrosystem have a cascading influence throughout the interactions of all outer layers. More specifically, if it is the belief of the culture that parents should be solely responsible for raising their children, that culture is less likely to provide resources to help parents. This, in turn, affects the structures in which the parent's function. The parents' ability or inability to carry out the responsibility toward their child within the context of the child's microsystem is likewise affected.

Chronosystem

This system encompasses the dimension of time as it relates to a child's environment. Elements within this system can be either external, such as timing of a parent's death, or internal, such as the physiological changes that occur with the aging of a child. As children get older, they may react differently to environmental changes and may be more able to determine more how that change will influence them. As this model suggests, the quality and contexts of the child's environment is critical to the ongoing development. The complexity of interactions can arise as the child's physical and cognitive structures grow and mature.

Cultural Ecological System

Cultural Eco-System

The author is proposing a Cultural Eco-Systems views culture as the primary system of understanding and the initial base of all experiences, which pivots slightly from the Bronfenbrenner's approach. Through this model, culture engages the individual at every system level, and it encourages them to respond in a way that supports their cultural knowledge and understanding, until a new paradigm is encountered, which may promote them to a new cultural conscience. Since this is a systems perspective, deficits are not seen as existing within the person as he/she progresses, but the culture continues to offer experiences through one's kaleidoscope. For instance, many families of color, particularly those that live in the culture of poverty, experience a number of ecosystem challenges that have negative impacts on children development, rearing practices, and cultural milieu. As a result, the culture indoctrinates the individual through reinforcers/punishers that perpetuate cultural norms until these customs and/or beliefs are threatened.

Cultural Resilience

Couched within the cultural eco-systems is cultural resilience. Resilience has many definitions but it is mostly concerned with individual variations in response to risk and his/her ability to overcome stress and adversity as it relates to life hazards. In one's ability to overcome life's stressors, there are different types of resilience. Psychological resilience is comprised of internal states of well-being or adapting well to the environment or both (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). More particularly, children are resilient when "(a) they receive good and stable care from someone; (b) they are good learners and problem-solvers, (c) they are engaging to other people, and (d) they have an area of competence and perceived efficacy" (Masten et al., 1990, p.438). Cultural resilience examines the adversity encountered by a cultural group and the group's (individual) ability to negotiate risk variation among themselves. This process-focused approach analyzes and contrasts the dynamic interactions among cultural risk mechanisms and cultural protective factors, mediated by an individual's cognitive appraisal of the situation. The presence of potential cultural risk may or may not pose a threat to an individual as risks are defined by individual's appraisal, however, those risk may threaten cultural homogeneity evoking cultural resilience. It is the individual's appraisal of the risk or situation that becomes the pivotal catalyst in this dynamic process.

For cultural resilience to be a staple of any group there must be a confluence of environmental and individual variables that may not be mutually exclusive. Environmental variable such as family discord, presence of malcontent, and lack of readily available resources and external support systems impact coping efforts and the function of any protective factors. When enmeshed in high-risk cultural environments, protective factors become extremely critical in helping the cultural group survive and thrive socially and culturally. Additionally, individual factors such as lack of self-efficacy and self-esteem hurt personalize protective mechanisms. "From the convergence of resiliency theory with ecological systems theory, the profile of a resilience fostering environment emerges as one that fosters high expectations, provides caring, support, and opportunities for participation" (Rausch, Lovett, & Walker, 2003, p.574).

Family Systems

Probably the greatest arena which influences the perpetuation of cultural norms is directly related to the family. For many, a family is viewed as a socialized, basic unit consisting of

parents (guardians) and children. While this is a sufficient definition it does little to capture the culture essence. Family, as defined by Tseng and Hsu (1991), is "the basic socio-cultural unit…the nest for growth of an individual, the resource for social support, and the institution through which culture is transmitted" (p. 1). For most, the family represents and sustains a unique culture in and other itself. In order to develop strategies to work with family systems it is important to understand the cultural entities and cultural transmissions and how these areas form knowledge bases to provide needed services. Families, as groups, are likely to come in contact with a variety of mental health and healthcare providers when there is a suspected problem/disease/disability. Depending on previous engagements with the variety of entities and the familiarity with the system some families may transmits positive, negative, or mixed signals to their children or other members. For example, a culturally-sensitive school psychologist may understand that for many Hispanic and Latino families, the typical view of school systems is that they are self-sufficient and capable of handling all situations with their children. Hispanics and Latinos generally seek not to interfere with school business or school staff and when being called upon to assist in a problem with their son/daughter can be confusing if not embarrassing. The level of embarrassment may be exacerbated by the behavior and/or situation, presenting a negative reflection on the family as a whole. Through this example, it is clear that the family is not afraid of the school, but sees those professionals as having a job to do and clear boundaries have to be followed. Further, the child directly/indirectly learns not to draw negative or unwanted attention to the family and the cultural group. These expectations consistently convey the cultural and ethnic beliefs of the group.

Predispositions Systems

What we know little about is how genes, culture, and the external environment play upon the brain to produce our behavior (Richerson & Boyd, 2001). The biological makeup of an individual is also influenced by culture, in that culture suggests how one acts upon his/her environment. While many feel that *race* and culture are indistinguishable, there are technically three major races of humankind: Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid. These three races present physical traits that appear to be distinct in the ancestral line. Mongoloids are believed to be a straight-haired type, medium in complexion, jaw protrusion, nose-breadth, and inclining probably to round-headedness. Negroids, in general, differ from Caucasoids with flattish nose, flat root of the nose, narrower ears, narrower joints, frontal skull eminences, less hairy, longer eyelashes, and cruciform pattern of second and third molars. Caucasoids traits were recognized by: by thin and narrow nostrils, a small mouth, and slightly angled faces. Additionally, Caucasoids cranial have been considered the largest out of all groups, which has now been disproven by numerous anthropologists (Wikipedia, 2005). These three *races* strongly suggest that there is a connection between culture and biology and there are ancestral linkages both socially and physically. As a result, human differences may be largely attributed to biological causes.

Culture, as we know it, is taught by motivated humans, acquired by motivated learners, and stored and manipulated in human brains. Culture is an evolving product of populations of human brains and the expansion of human capital and its relationship to biology. Humans are adapted to learn and manage culture by the way natural selection has arranged our brains. Human social learners in turn arrange features of his/her brain as they learn from others (aka cultural agents and leaders) and the environment (the interaction between the individual and the environment). Hence, if a culture is predisposed towards the manifestation of a particular

phenotype, it is most likely to unfold due to preexisting cultural conditions. Culture is a major aspect of what the human brain does, just in the same way as smelling and breathing are what noses do (Richerson & Boyd, 2001). Culture-making brains are the product of more than two million years of more or less gradual increases in brain size and cultural complexity (Richerson & Boyd, 2001). During this evolution, culture must have increased genetic fitness or the psychological capacities for it would not have evolved. Indeed, anthropologists long interpreted much of culture in adaptive terms rather than a neat, narrow boundary between innate and cultural processes that can be characterize by a short list of simple biological constraints on human behavior, we imagine a wide, historically contingent, densely intertwined set of phenomena with causal arrows operating in both directions (Richerson & Boyd, 2001).

Educational/Social Systems

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's theory, educational and social systems play an important role in the extension of cultural development and understanding in the Cultural Eco-System Model. The educational system, excluding the family, is the most prominent cultural teacher. Through classrooms, on a daily basis, culture is taught directly and indirectly, thereby, impacting not only what is taught and learned, but how it is applied. Further, if demonstrated in an inappropriate method, the non-conforming aspect may be punished in order to "correct" the behavior. The link between the school and the community further promote appropriate cultural, social dynamics. Through the links and exchanges between educational and social systems, social competence is defined. With social competence, one acquires the ability to understand and relate aspects of their life to their culture. An individual is rewarded when his/her life are aligned to the cultural goals. As a result, culture is perpetuated to everyday dialogue and conversation. For instance, if a cultural group is apprehensive about police presence due to a non-trusting relationship, members of the cultural community teach others to withhold information when speaking to the police as a point to support cultural members (aka, not snitching). To this end, children learn to have distaste for law enforcement not because of their biological makeup but through social exchanges. Here, cultural conformity is not just a way of life, it is survival.

Dyadic Systems

The connections between systems are equally important as they further support cultural values and ethnic socialization. Somewhat similar to educational and social systems, dyadic systems envelopes more than just educational or social networks, but reaches in multiple aspects of everyday culture. Dyadic systems may incorporate, but not limited to, families, neighborhoods, religion, schools, government, etc. These linkages can be both direct and indirect as they represent the all-encompassing temporal component in which the eco-cultural system is immersed. This level is characterized by the relationship between common belief system, lifestyles, laws, economic and social resources, etc. The relationships offer a cultural blueprint for the culture and any subcultures. For example, a strong dyadic system is government. While many people may never become a politician, the cultural environment of those who serve has far reaching arms into the personal lives of many Americans. Consider the healthcare act recently upheld by the US Supreme Court. Approximately 50 percent of Americans support more of "universal" approach to providing healthcare to all, while the other half feels these policies are intrusive upon personal liberties.

Cultural Consciousness Skills

Personal Awareness

Typically, the basis of values indoctrinated by the United States (and other industrialized societies) derived primarily from Western European influences and tend to emphasize: individualism, independence, autonomy, interpersonal competition, mastery, equality, punctuality, materialism, progress, and future orientation. Moreover, these values are supported by those who may even subscribe, culturally, to a different set, but not able to express it comfortably within the American culture. To this end, there are elements of our own culture that values interactions that are less formal, and demonstrate a high regard for personal achievement and fosters pride in direct and assertive interactional communication styles. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health clinicians who understand the extent to which they identify with each of the American values will be in better position to determine how the values that they adhere to most strongly affect their practice and outlook. The professional will likely appreciate the influence and space of the mainstream culture on culturally diverse students, families, and colleagues.

There is an art to self-awareness and many fail to master it. In self-awareness, one not only recognizes the differences in one's own world view from that of others but seeks to understand those differences as a point of self-education. For example, while the belief of psychologists is to value independence and autonomy in young children or who believe in attaining developmental milestones, may experience considerable dissonance in trying to comprehend why some American Indians and Latino parents appear to possess a relaxed attitude toward their children's achievement of self-reliance. This requires the clinician to work within the framework and context of the cultural ideology that is being presented. Moreover, the clinician must find avenues to remain as "value free" in order to serve the needs of the individual. Similarly, those practitioners who tend to believe that source of one's disability or disorder lies in the physical ability rather than the spiritual factors will need to work through the thoughts that may result from interactions with individuals committed to spiritual rand than medical/psychological treatments.

Knowledge of Other Cultures

While there may be many ways to learn about other cultures, four primary methods tend to resurface more frequently. The first method, reading of books/materials on other cultures, is probably the most accessible and least threatening technique. While literature provides a window into other cultures it also comes at the expense of someone else's viewpoint and perspective, just like this book. Literature can provide diverse views of culture, but should only be used as a means of information gathering. "Reading provides a broader perspective of cultures while helping the practitioner see the continuum of culture" (Miranda, 2002, p. 357). The second area, interacting with people from diverse cultures, offers a true encounter of learning about cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Through cultural mediators, those who help you to explore the culture, provide opportunities to ask questions about what has been read in books, seen on TV, or experienced in real life. Further, cultural nuances can be explained, clarified, or even refuted by the cultural mediators. The one downfall to having close encounters with someone from one culture is the experience is limited to one person's account. To find a true representation of culture, it has to be view beyond one person's lens. The third technique, learning the language of the culture, is time-consuming and requires a tremendous commitment. Of which, most working professionals will not do. Language is so critical to developing a working knowledge of culture,

as it reflects the verbal/non-verbal exchanges in the ethnic socialization. The final method is an excellent way to increase cross-cultural understanding. Participating in the daily life of another culture is simply carrying out a cultural immersion experience. In doing so, one becomes privy to symbolism, persuasiveness, and the conscious/unconscious awareness and understanding. In order to perform this task, however, requires the individual to take risks by admitting biases, prejudices, and untruths at the expense of learning something new.

      The landmarks of normal psychological development and the typical signs of psychological developments are different per culture. In order to account for these differences, cultural interviews need to be conducted in a sensitive yet comprehensive manner.

Applying Knowledge

      While an individual may have good introspection and has gained the prerequisite knowledge, everything is contingent upon how does one apply what has been learning or uncovered. Becoming cross-culturally conscious requires taking emotional and at times physical risks. While it may be uncomfortable and painstaking, at times, it is important discuss issues with those who may present different ideas and experiences. It is through applying the knowledge, an individual has to go back, take a second (or third) look, re-conceptualize, reexamine, rethink, and re-question his/her stance in order to be complete in their cultural reality.

      If we move beyond, but inclusive of cultural competency, to cultural consciousness, the object of knowledge is not just a series of lists of cultural attributes but what is required challenge our assumptions, values, and biases of injustices to help others. Therefore, the object of knowledge in cultural consciousness is to carry out the social roles and responsibilities as a health practitioner. The manner of experiencing this type of knowledge is different from knowledge required in other areas and courses. Kumagai and Lypson (2005) suggest specific techniques as stories, cognitive disequilibrium, and keeping it current to instill and fulfill the notion of social justice.

Conclusion

      We use our mind's strength through the use of our natural abilities. However, to learn more effectively and efficiently, we must also be able to develop and use abilities beyond our natural styles. Cognitive style-based instruction and processing is intuitively appealing and thus will have a long stay with the educational and psychological areas, especially as high stakes testing proliferates and colleges seek to admit the and retain the brightest students.

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