Chapter 1
Introduction: Contextualizing Immigration Using Bioecological Systems Theory

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The importance of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1995) bioecological theory of human development and the impact on how social and behavioral scientists approach the study of human beings and their environments cannot be overstated (Ceci, 2006). To date, there is no unifying theoretical framework that systematically attempts to address the comprehensive nature of immigration. This edited volume has compiled papers based on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory as the framework for understanding the overlapping and intersecting contexts that influence different populations of immigrants. Together, these authors approached the study of immigration across development using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The mixed-methods nature of this edited volume, combined with the focus on immigrant ecologies, provides a much-needed, comprehensive perspective on a heavily researched topic.

The conceptualization of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development primarily focused on the characteristics and influences of the different contexts (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems; Bronfenbrenner, 1977) on the individual. He later expanded on this theory by stressing the role played by the individual, the impact of time, and most important of all, proximal processes (Process-Person-Context-Time [PPCT] model; Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Specifically, because the four elements of this model (process, person, context, time) simultaneously influence human beings’ developmental outcomes, their effects are not merely additive (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). He viewed development as a continuous and bidirectional interaction between the individual and the contexts.

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The “Person” part of the PPCT model refers to personal characteristics of the individual (and those with whom he or she typically interacts). These can be “demand” characteristics (e.g., age, physical appearance), “resource” characteristics (e.g., intelligence, skills), and “force” characteristics (e.g., temperament; see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These characteristics influence what occurs during the proximal “Process” which refers to the enduring forms of reciprocal interactions by the “Person” and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment.

The systematic contexts that make up the “Context” component of the PPCT model include micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner defines the microsystem as the most proximal setting in which a person is situated to be face to face with others while engaging in daily activities. Specifically, it is the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in the immediate settings containing the person. The mesosystem is the relations among two or more microsystems in which the activities and interpersonal relations are occurring across settings instead of one microsystem. The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem embracing specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which the person is found. The macrosystem includes the institutional systems of a culture such as economic, social, educational, and political systems including the overarching belief system and ideology (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

The impact of time refers to both development over time and the historical time in which these individuals live. Bronfenbrenner refers to this as the chronosystem which takes into account changes that occur over the individual’s lifetime caused by events or experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). These experiences can be from the environment and external to the individual (e.g., a sibling’s birth) and/or from within the individual (e.g., puberty). They can also be normative, expected changes or transitions (e.g., starting school), or nonnormative, unexpected (e.g., war, coronavirus pandemic). Bronfenbrenner indicates that these experiences “alter the existing relation between person and environment, thus creating a dynamic that may instigate developmental change” (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 201). This is particularly relevant when examining the lives of immigrants because the chronosystem includes the nonnormative external event of moving from one country to another. The immigration experience, including acculturating (i.e., adapting to a new culture) is an active and dynamic process occurring within and outside of the individual. Specifically, it is even more imperative to approach acculturation over time when addressing developmental processes that occur during specific times such as adolescence (Titzmann & Lee, 2018) and when acculturation processes have been found to differ with age (Cheung, Chudek, & Heine, 2011).

Although Bronfenbrenner indicates that the ideal method of study includes a comprehensive examination of all the components of the PPCT model at the same time (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), the theory is complex, with three types of person characteristics, four types of context, and three ways of conceptualizing time, all of which simultaneously engage in subtle interaction in the course of ever-changing
proximal processes. Jaeger (2016) and Tudge and colleagues (Tudge et al., 2016; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009) agree that there is no need to include all of these factors in the research design, and studies can be effectively designed that use Bronfenbrenner’s theory as the foundation for their research. Furthermore, Tudge et al. (2009) argues that it is acceptable to base one’s research on an earlier version of the theory or even on a subset of its key concepts. Within developmental psychology, over time, the theory has also been modified to capture the experiences of diverse groups of people. Thus, each chapter in this volume examines specific aspects of this model, and taken together, this book provides a comprehensive look at the immigration process’ impact on individuals.

Some ways in which Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory has been adapted and applied includes Garcia Coll and Szalacha’s (2004) Integrative Model of Child Development, which emphasizes the influences on the experiences of marginalized children, focusing on their positions as “outsiders” (p. 82). Similarly, the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) focuses on how society’s racial organization impacts families through systems that privilege one race and disadvantages others. The Ecological Acculturation Framework (EAF; Salo & Birman, 2015) examines specific circumstances and life domains confronted by immigrant groups who are influenced by more than one macrosystem. While any of these modified theories are appropriate, this book includes a series of papers based on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory as the framework for understanding the overlapping and intersecting contexts that influence different populations of immigrants. Specifically, it addresses the various ways that immigrants can be influenced as they adjust in their new countries and systematically considers the contexts that immigrants navigate.

Context of Immigration

The complex nature of immigration and its impact on migrating individuals and families make it conducive for ecological study. As the Bioecological Systems Theory stipulates, immigrant adults and children undergo many changes in the receiving countries, due to influences from proximal and distal contexts within the new country. Immigration policies, cultural attitudes toward newcomers, and interpersonal relationships are among the factors that contribute to immigrant functioning. The confluence of personal, interpersonal, and contextual influences on immigrant adjustment makes the Bioecological Systems Theory an appropriate theoretical framework for the study of immigrant groups.

The chapters in this book highlight research on immigrants to North America, particularly the United States and Canada. Historically, Canada has had a relatively open immigration policy (Smick, 2006), and recent estimates report that immigrants make up almost 21% of the nation’s population (Statistics Canada, 2011). In the United States, 17% of the population is comprised of immigrants (Batalova, Blizzard, & Bolter, 2020). The adjustment of the significant numbers of
immigrants to these countries is a matter of great importance for the nations that receive them.

Immigrants arrive to the receiving countries seeking employment and educational opportunities for themselves and their children (Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco, & Hughes, 2010; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). In the case of refugees, the United States and Canada provide asylum from oppressive conditions (Grambs, 1981). While on the one hand, immigration represents hope and opportunity for migrants, immigrants can also stand to face individual and structural discrimination, anti-immigrant hostility, and, in the case of undocumented immigration, the threat of deportation (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008; Stewart, Pitts, & Osborne, 2011). These experiences in the new country add complexity to immigrants’ adjustment processes and the attainment of goals.

Immigrants to both the United States and Canada come from a diversity of sending countries. Waves of immigration to these countries saw immigrants first from Western Europe, then Eastern Europe. Subsequent waves included immigrants from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa (Ewing, 2012). Both nations are typically characterized as “multicultural,” or having the stance that newcomers are welcome to integrate aspects of their cultures of origin and the host society’s culture (Berry, 2009). However, the path to true multiculturalism has proven difficult. Historically, policies in both countries have favored the entry of racial and ethnic groups that were more likely to assimilate due to racial and cultural characteristics (Brubaker, 2001; Trew, 2013). Wars and relationships with foreign powers also shaped immigration policies (Ewing, 2012; Troper, 1993). At present, the United States, often lauded as a “nation of immigrants” (Deaux, 2006), has instituted zero-tolerance border policies that have forcibly separated children from their parents (American Civil Liberties Union).

Taking into consideration these histories (i.e., chronosystems) and policies (i.e., exosystems), the chapters in this book examine the various contexts that have impact on immigrant settlement and adjustment. Each chapter examines the psychosocial adjustment of different racial, cultural, or ethnic groups. This book includes research on Asian immigrants as one heavily researched population in psychology. Here, careful attention is paid to national and cultural differences within this population. Chapters focus specifically on the unique experiences of Chinese (Yamamoto et al., Chap. 11, this volume), Korean (Chu & Brown, Chap. 8, this volume) and South Asian (Raj et al., Chap. 3, this volume) immigrants. Ethnic differences within the Chinese population are also highlighted (Chuang et al., this volume). In so doing, the general “Asian” category is rendered ineffective for the careful ecological study of these populations.

This edited volume also includes research on populations that have not received significant attention in psychology and human development. For instance, the cultural adjustment of Black immigrants from African (Onwujuba et al., Chap. 10, and Thelamour, Chap. 7, this volume) and Caribbean (Formala & Thomas, Chap. 6, this volume) nations is studied. The population of Black immigrants to the United States is rapidly increasing (Morgan-Trostle, Zheng, & Lipscombe, 2016), and they
contribute to the ethnic diversity in the nation broadly and the Black population specifically. Thus, theoretically sound research on their experiences is warranted.

**Book Overview**

Following this introduction, Chuang et al. (Chap. 2) utilize Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory to emphasize the importance of “Location, Location, Location”: *Contextualizing Chinese Families in Three Geolocations*. The authors examine the chrono-, macro-, and exosystemic factors that influence Chinese families in Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan. Chuang and colleagues challenge researchers to consider the contexts from which these immigrants come in order to conduct ecologically sound research on Chinese immigrants. The conclusions from this chapter can be expanded to other immigrant ethnic, cultural, and racial groups that are often categorized without deep investigation into the nuances of their histories.

In part one, *Person*, five chapters explore immigrant individual processes (e.g., identity development) in diverse samples of immigrants to the United States and Canada. Raj, Daga, and Raval’s chapter (Chap. 3), *Cultural Identity across the Lifespan: Using an Ecological Framework to Contextualize the Experiences of Asian Indian Immigrants and their Children*, examines narratives of cultural identity and experiences among three Asian Indian groups (i.e., immigrant mothers and their ten school-age children, as well as emerging adults) in the United States. All three groups’ cultural identities focused on the influence of the microsystem, which included their families, peers, and communities and the macrosystem that included both Indian and American cultural identities and values. However, college-aged students’ narratives of their identity also included the chronosystem, specifically, navigating their bicultural identities over time, and also generationally, as they noted success within their families and communities over generations.

In *Identity and Belonging: The Role of the Mesosystem in the Adaptation of Russian-speaking Immigrant Youth in Canada* (Chap. 4), Glozman and Chuang examined youths’ reports on factors in the microsystem such as their relationships with their parents and peers, as well as their immediate environments, such as their schools, extracurricular activities, and neighborhoods, that impacted their identities. However, the interactions between the microsystem factors (i.e., mesosystem) played a role in their identity and belonging. Specifically, parents’ decisions in their choices of neighborhoods to live in, schools, activities, etc. led to ethnic/cultural enclaves which provided a protective mechanism for their identity and belonging and consequently fostered their relationships with both their parents and peers.

Chan and Kiang (Chap. 5) longitudinally examined romantic relations among Asian American adolescents. In their chapter, *The Ecology of Dating Preferences Among Asian American Adolescents in Emerging Immigrant Communities*, individual-level differences emerged such as the adolescents’ personal beliefs and their desire to learn about other cultures and explore different options. Furthermore, the chapter suggests that dating preferences may reflect how Asian American ado-
lescents might be developing their identity. Microsystem factors such as parents’ and peers’ same race preferences and macrosystem influences such as culture, language, and values emerged as influential in predicting patterns in dating preferences. Four patterns of preference emerged when examining year-to-year variation in ethnic dating preferences.

In Chap. 6, *Social Representations of Blackness in America: Stereotypes About Black Immigrants and Black Americans*, Tormala and Thomas focused on the macrosystemic level of influence by examining stereotypes of Blackness that are known by a sample of Black immigrants, Black Americans, and White Americans. In this study, acculturation was implicit in this study through the learning of widely held stereotypes. Specifically, they studied the content of the stereotypes about Black Americans and Black immigrants, the extent to which they are shared across racial and ethnic groups, and how many stereotypes exist. Their results demonstrated that generalizations about Black Americans were broad and largely negative and were shared across the three participant groups. Black immigrants, on the other hand, had more specific stereotypes and were less negative than those for Black Americans.

Thelamour’s chapter, *A Mixed-Methods Examination of African Immigrants’ Perceptions of Black American Culture and Acculturation* (Chap. 7), focused on the ways African immigrants define Black American culture, one culture, or macrosystem that has an impact on Black immigrants. Then, the immigrants’ acculturation in several life domains were analyzed using the Relative Acculturation Extended Model, both to determine what acculturation strategies were used and also to determine if they differed according to definitions of Black American culture. Qualitative findings revealed that African immigrants had varied and diverse definitions of Black Americans that were generally positive, contrary to general beliefs of the population. Quantitative results showed that these immigrants integrated native and Black American cultures, but showed variation across life domains. In general, their cultural adjustment did not differ according to definitions of the host culture.

In part two, *Home*, the four chapters focus on the home environment, and the way immigration and its related realities influence parenting and the parent-child relationship. Chu and Brown’s chapter (8), *Korean American Adolescents and Their Mothers: Intergenerational Differences and Its Consequences*, examined how the difference between the adolescents’ and the mothers’ acculturation and model minority stereotype (MMS) endorsement was associated with the adolescents’ perception of intergenerational cultural conflict and his/her psychological well-being. Results indicated that adolescents whose mothers were less acculturated to the American culture experienced more cultural conflict with their parents and, in turn, felt more psychological distress. Furthermore, the adolescents whose mothers endorsed the MMS to a greater degree experienced more cultural conflict with their parents and, in turn, felt more psychological distress. The study considered the influence of parents in the adolescents’ microsystem and by examining conflict and how the mother’s own acculturation and MMS endorsement creates the gap between her and her child.

In Chap. 9, “It Would Be Very Difficult for Me to Explain This to Them”: *Cultural Translation of Six Immigrant Chinese Parents in a Midwestern US Context*, Wang
and Plano Clark studied the influence of cultural translation on parenting practices in a sample of Chinese immigrant parents. They examined how the interaction of their native cultures and US culture, particularly in the Midwestern United States (where few Chinese live relative to major seaboard enclaves), shaped these parents’ approaches to raising their children. The micro- and macrosystemic influences that were highlighted in the findings include parents’ interactions with their own peers and neighbors, church involvement, and US cultural values that encourage children’s autonomy and less strictness than would be acceptable per Chinese cultural standards.

Onwujuba and Nesteruk (Chapter 10) focused on cultural influences on Nigerian immigrants’ parenting practices. In their chapter, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Nigerian Immigrant Parents Navigating a New Cultural Paradigm*, the authors investigated Nigerian parenting traditions and practices as an exosystem to the immigrant parents who currently reside in the United States. The results underscored the ways parents’ own acculturation strategies (i.e., the ways that balanced mainstream US and Nigerian cultures) altered the ways they approached parenting: participants indicated that they adapted some US parenting practices while still trying to maintain their heritage traditions. Further, parents were critical of the socializing influences in the United States, particularly those that ran counter to their goals for their children.

Lastly, part three, *School*, focuses on how immigrant parents and children engage with schooling in the United States. Here, relationships between parents and their children and children with peers and teachers are studied. This collection of studies includes research from children’s and parents’ perspectives. In Chap. 11, *Demand and Direct Involvement: Chinese American and European American Preschoolers’ Perceptions of Parental Involvement in Children’s Schooling*, Yamamoto, Li, Bao, and Suh study the how a socioeconomically diverse sample of Chinese and European American preschoolers view parental involvement based, presumably, on involvement practices in their home microsystem. Findings revealed that children recognized their parents’ roles as promoters of learning who expressed particular behavioral and academic demands at school. Children’s narratives also showed their understanding of the parents’ reasoning about attending school. Group differences analyses demonstrate that Chinese American children were more likely to verbalize their understandings of their parents’ direct involvement practices than their European American counterparts.

Shuey and Leventhal close the book with their research on ethnically diverse immigrant families’ (i.e., Latinx and Black Caribbean) perceptions of their neighborhoods as related to child care. Chapter 12, *Neighborhood Experiences of Immigrant Families with Young Children in the United States*, focused on the meso-system of family, neighborhood, and child care, emphasizing immigrant enclaves in which the majority of immigrant families reside. Most of the immigrant mothers of color used child care, often relying on social networks and resources. These networks were also protective when mothers perceived a lack of safety in their neighborhoods. Those who did not live in ethnic enclaves wished for more same-ethnic neighbors to be support systems in the face of discrimination and isolation.
In many ways, this volume of studies reflects trends in the existing literature, wherein individual adjustment processes and home and school environments have gained increasing attention. However, placing these issues within the Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory provides readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of immigrants, families, and their communities.

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