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# Family Psychology and Cultural Diversity

## *Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Application*

José Szapocznik and William M. Kurtines

*This article builds on the authors' work with troubled Hispanic youth and their families to extend the concept of contextualism. First, it discusses family and culture as literatures that have emerged from a contextualist perspective but are separate from each other. Second, it integrates these literatures by introducing the concept of the embeddedness of the individual within the context of the family within the context of culture. Finally, this concept of the embeddedness of contexts is extended to encompass a view of families embedded within culturally diverse contexts.*

There is a growing recognition that contemporary psychology is undergoing a paradigm shift. Many challenges are being raised to a psychology concerned primarily with the individual as a focus of study. One important challenge has come from the contextualist view, which has had a broad impact on the field (cf. Liddle, 1987). Contextualism generally refers to the view that behavior cannot be understood outside of the context in which it occurs. Contextualism is concerned with the interaction between the organism and its environment—explaining and understanding the changing individual in a changing world. This article contributes to the debate by extending contextualism in a number of directions.

Our interest in extending the concept of contextualism grew out of our experience working with troubled Hispanic youths. Over the past two decades we have struggled to develop theory, conduct research, and design interventions with this population (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989; Szapocznik, Kurtines, Foote, & Perez-Vidal, 1983, 1986; Szapocznik, Kurtines, Santisteban, & Rio, 1990; Szapocznik et al. 1988; Szapocznik, Rio, & Kurtines, 1991). We became increasingly aware of broader movements within the field that have had substantial implications for our work. In the past decade there has been a considerable effort to define contextual issues in terms of the individual in the context of the both family (e.g., Kaslow, 1987; Liddle, 1987) and culture (e.g., Sampson, 1988; Sue & Zane, 1987). These efforts have produced an extensive body of psychological literature that addresses the individual in the context of the family and in the context of culture; however, each literature has emerged as a relatively distinct and separate area of study, as illustrated in Figure 1.

As we learned more about developments in these areas and attempted to apply them to our work, we recognized certain limitations inherent in studying the in-

dividual in each context separately. We began to formulate a model that extended the concept of contextualism in two important ways. First, to help bridge the gap between the literatures on family and culture, we gave greater emphasis to the embeddedness of contexts themselves. That is, we extended the concept of contextualism to include the notion that the individual needs to be understood in the context of the family, and that the family in turn needs to be understood in the context of the culture. To help us understand the reality of cultural diversity in our work with troubled Hispanic adolescents, we also extended the concept of contextualism to include the notion of the individual embedded within a family that is itself embedded in a *culturally diverse context*. Our experience with these youth taught us that if we were interested in studying cultural context, we had to study it as it *really* occurs, rather than as some idealized historical concept of indigenous culture. That is, the idealized historical and homogenous concept of culture often found in the literature needs to be expanded, because in modern society most families (including ethnic minorities) are actually exposed to a context that is culturally diverse and heterogeneous.

In this article we propose to view the individual, family, and culture in a more complete contextualist paradigm that includes the more complex notion of individual within a family within a culturally diverse context: *the embeddedness of contexts within a diverse and complex cultural milieu*. In the first two parts of the article,

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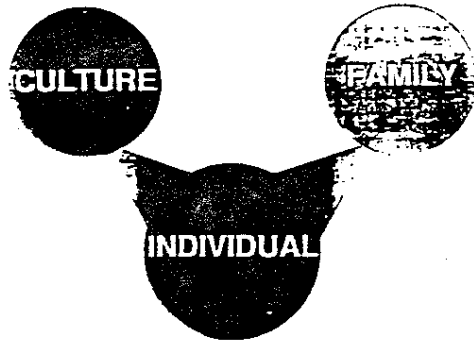
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**Figure 1**

*The Individual in the Context of the Family and Culture*



we briefly describe some of the emerging literature that addresses the individual in the context of the family and the individual in the context of the culture. In the third part, we introduce the idea of the embeddedness of contexts. In the fourth and final part, we outline the model that has evolved from our work with Hispanic adolescents that incorporates the notion of the individual within a family within a context in which the cultural milieu is defined by increasing diversity and complexity.

### **The Individual in the Context of the Family**

A recognition of the importance of understanding the individual in the context of the family is as old as the field of psychiatry itself, beginning with Sigmund Freud's profound preoccupation with the influence of the family on early childhood development and the development of psychopathology (Freud, 1953, 1965). More recently, the recognition of the importance of understanding the individual in the context of the family is reflected in the family psychology movement. This movement has had a broad impact on the field as well as important implications for our own area of concern: conduct and behavioral disorders in children and adolescents.

Considerable research literature linking conduct disorders and behavior problems to family relational patterns has now evolved. Family interactional characteristics have been identified that place youth at risk for conduct disorders (Alexander, 1973; Farrington, 1978; Hanson, Henggeler, Haeefe, & Rodick, 1984; Hetherington & Martin, 1979; Kazdin, 1987; Loeber & Dishion, 1984; McCord, McCord, & Zola, 1959; Patterson, 1982, 1986; Patterson & Dishion, 1985; Rutter & Guiller, 1983). Our work with Hispanic youths has also contributed to identifying dysfunctional family interactional patterns that impact on conduct disorders in youth (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989; Szapocznik et al., 1990).

There is a small but growing literature that suggests that certain family behaviors may protect individuals from developing these disorders, even children who are oth-

erwise in contexts that may place them at high risk (Becerra, 1988; Jaco, 1959; Laosa, 1990; Loeber & Dishion, 1984; Madsen, 1964; Sanchez-Avendez, 1988; Santisteban, Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Rio, in press). We also have proposed a number of protective family characteristics that enhance the family's ability to respond to stressors (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989).

As illustrated in Figure 1, most of this literature focuses on the link between the individual and the family and gives relatively little attention to the role of culture.

### **The Individual in the Context of Culture**

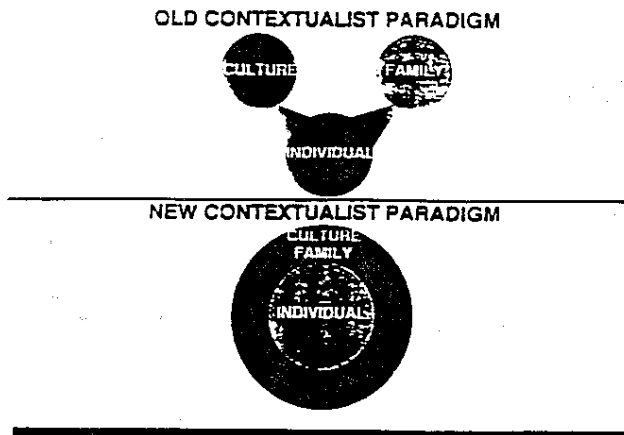
Culture, like family, has long been recognized as an important context for understanding the individual, and a large literature has emerged addressing concerns in cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Triandis & Brislin, 1984; Triandis et al. 1980-1981). In the mental health field there has been concern about the relationship of culture and individual psychopathology (e.g., Draguns, 1980; Marsella, 1979, 1980; Sanua, 1980), which has resulted in a significant movement to incorporate cultural concepts into mental health care (e.g., E. E. Jones & Korchin, 1982; R. L. Jones, 1980; Lefley & Pedersen, 1986; Marsella & Pedersen, 1981; Padilla, Ruiz, & Alvarez, 1975; Rogler, Malgady, Costantino, & Blumenthal, 1987; Rogler, Malgady, & Rodriguez, 1989; Sue & Zane, 1987). Most of this work has emphasized the relationship of culture and the individual. Thus, interest in culture has often reflected a profound concern with the impact of context on individual behavior, psychopathology, and mental health care, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The contextualist metaphor, however, has a more profound implication: the embeddedness of contexts themselves. Hence, the concern with the individual in a cultural macrocontext does not fully recognize the microcontext (e.g., the family) that links the individual to her or his culture. We have found it useful to extend our concern for culture to include the concept of the nesting of the individual within the family and the family within the culture.

### **The Embeddedness of Contexts**

In contrast to these large bodies of work on culture and on the individual, there is an emerging interest in a new contextualist paradigm that emphasizes the notion of embeddedness: the study of the individual within the context of a family, which is in turn embedded in a cultural context, as illustrated in Figure 2. Perhaps the most important pioneer of this more complete view of contextualism was Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1986). Bronfenbrenner's work strongly influenced our thinking, particularly in the early stages of our research. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) clearly stated "Seldom is attention paid to the person's behavior in more than one setting or to the way in which relations between settings can affect what happens within them" (p. 18). He postulated that an individual's ecological environment is composed of a complex set of nested structures that range from micro-

**Figure 2**  
A New Contextualist Paradigm: The Embeddedness of Contexts



to meso- to exosystems. A fledgling literature has built on the concept of the embeddedness of contexts and its application to work with families within larger social contexts. This includes the work of Auerswald (1971), Aponte (1974), Belsky (1980), Gable, Belsky, & Crnic (1992), Boyd-Franklin (1989), and McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano (1982). Empirical evidence of the impact of contextual variables in early childhood development has been reviewed by Zigler, Taussig, and Black (1992). They document the fact that interventions that target the social context in which families are embedded during the early childhood years have an impact on delinquent behavior 10-15 years later.

### A Model for a Culturally Pluralistic Milieu

#### Origins

Although the contextualist tradition is concerned with a broad range of contexts, for the purposes of developing a rigorous program of systematic research, we focused on two major aspects of context: family and culture. Because our work was with Hispanic adolescents and their families, we will begin with a brief description of the origins of our research; however, as will become clear, the implications of our work extend beyond this relatively specialized population. The implications extend to all families who are confronted by a complex and pluralistic cultural milieu. In the United States, this population has increasingly included virtually all families, regardless of their cultural or ethnic origin.

Our work emerged from the clinical observations of the impact of the acculturation process on Cuban refugee families during the early 1970s (Szapocznik, Scopetta, & King, 1978; Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines, & Arnalde, 1978); youngsters in these families were presenting with high rates of conduct problems (Szapocznik & Kurtines,

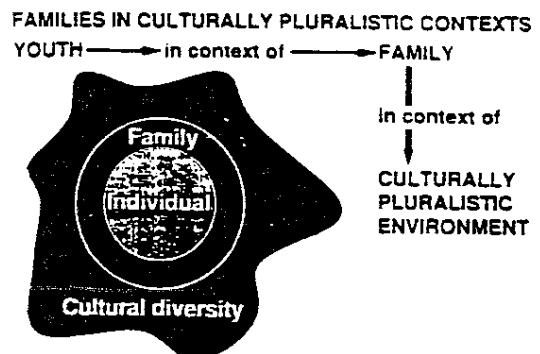
1980). Interestingly, in the early 1970s when the therapeutic zeitgeist for management of adolescent problems was strongly individualistic, we—coming from an Hispanic perspective—recognized the importance of studying these problems in the context of family and culture.

As we began our clinical work, it became apparent that cultural forces were impacting the way in which family interacted in very specific ways and that these changes in family dynamics appeared to underlie the conduct problems in these immigrant youth. The first step in working with these families was to understand the impact of these cultural forces on the family. It was crucial that we recognized that we could not fully explain the nature of the family changes that were taking place by viewing families strictly within the context of their culture of origin. Rather, the families that we were working with were living in a multicultural context. For this reason, we had to adjust our thinking to understanding families—no longer only within the framework of their culture, but within the framework of a culturally pluralistic environment, as depicted in Figure 3.

The problem that we faced then was to modify our understanding of the concept of embeddedness to include the influence of a culturally pluralistic environment on the family (Szapocznik, & Kurtines, 1980; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980). Our earliest understanding of the problem was that our Cuban families were embedded in a culturally diverse context, in which parents and children were exposed to both Hispanic and mainstream values and customs. Following traditional learning curves, young people acculturated far more quickly to the mainstream, whereas parents tended to remain far more attached to their traditions (Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines, & Arnalde, 1978). As can be seen in Figure 4, this framework that considered the effect of a culturally diverse environment not only explained the dynamics that were occurring across the generations but was also differentially predictive of impact by gender.

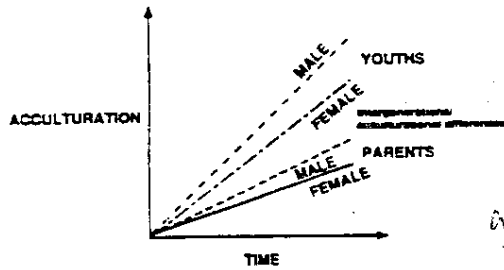
Thus, our willingness to view the individual within the context of a family exposed to a culturally pluralistic

**Figure 3**  
A Model for the Embeddedness of Contexts Within a Culturally Pluralistic Milieu



*How does this impact diabetes?*

**Figure 4**  
Acculturation as a Function of Time, Age, and Gender in Cuban-American Immigrants



Note: From "Theory and Measurement of Acculturation" by J. Szapocznik, M. A. Scopano, W. Kurtines, & M. A. Arango, 1978, *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, 12, p. 115. Copyright 1978 by the Interamerican Society of Psychology. Reprinted by permission.

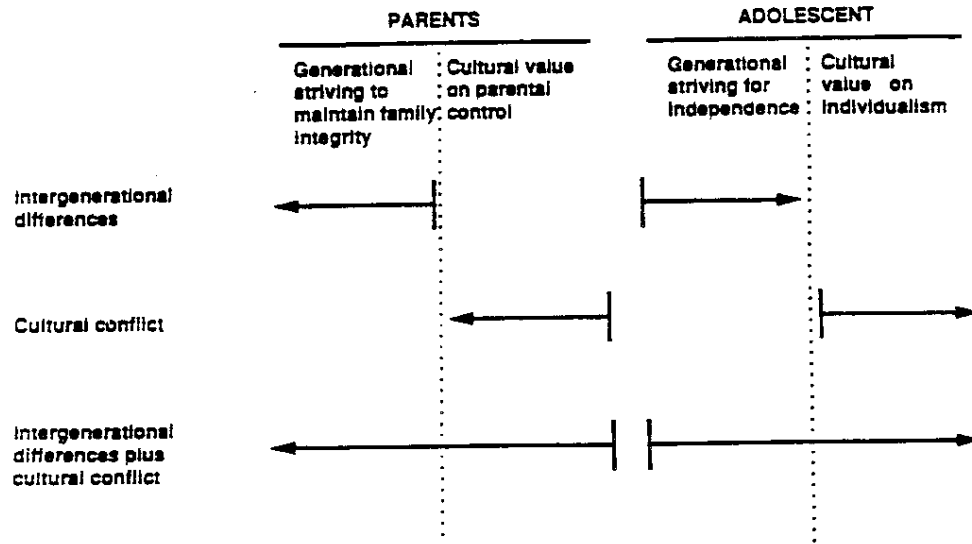
others (the elders) for family connectedness. As Figure 5 illustrates, this struggle usually develops in families around the time of adolescence, but in this case the magnitude of the struggle was considerably exacerbated by acculturational differences across generations. As a result of this struggle, children lost emotional and social support from their families, and parents lost their positions of leadership.

The impact of a culturally diverse environment on these families resulted in the emergence of conflict-laden intergenerational acculturational differences in which parents and youths developed different cultural alliances (Hispanic and American, respectively). These intergenerationally related cultural differences were added to the usual intergenerational conflicts that occur in families with adolescents to produce a much compounded and exacerbated intergenerational and intercultural conflict. As a consequence, parents became unable to properly manage youngsters who made strong claims for autonomy and who no longer accepted their parents' traditional Cuban ways, giving rise to the emergence of conduct problems in adolescents.

From our earliest work then, we have been concerned about the embeddedness of contexts—the youth within the family within a cultural context. Our concern has been that the kind of cultural context in which our Hispanic families find themselves is not the kind of context that is usually studied, that is, an Hispanic context.

milieu provided the framework for explaining how family dynamics evolved within a culturally diverse environment and how such changes were linked to the emergence of conduct problems in youngsters (Szapocznik, Santisteban, Rio, Perez-Vidal, & Kurtines, 1986). Families exposed to a culturally diverse environment developed a classic Ericksonian challenge: a family struggle in which some family members (the youth) struggled for autonomy and

**Figure 5**  
The Additive Effects of Intergenerational and Acculturational Differences in Cuban-American Immigrant Families



Note: From "Bicultural Effectiveness Training: A Treatment Intervention for Enhancing Intercultural Adjustment in Cuban-American Families" by J. Szapocznik, D. Santisteban, W. M. Kurtines, A. Perez-Vidal, & O. M. Vis, 1984, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 6, p. 328. Copyright 1984 by the Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences. Reprinted by permission.

Rather, our families are embedded in a culturally diverse context.

Moreover, we found it necessary to extend the conventional approach to the study of Hispanic families to permit us to study the family in a way that more truly represents the cultural reality in which it is embedded, namely, in a multicultural context. Our work thus posed a challenge not only for us but for the tradition in the research on culture that has tended to focus largely on historical or idealized aspects of culture. This challenge was to seek an understanding of the importance of culture as it occurs, which is in an increasingly multicultural and pluralistic context.

This subtle distinction between the study of culture as it occurs versus as it occurred is significant to a contextualist perspective. From a contextualist perspective, culture is important because it represents a *context* that helps to understand and explain human behavior. To that extent, it is the full range of cultural context—its history, complexity, and diversity—that is of concern within the contextualist paradigm.

### **Bicultural Effectiveness Training: An Intervention for Families in Culturally Pluralistic Milieus**

As a result of the enhanced theoretical understanding that our model of the individual embedded within a family within a context of cultural diversity provided, we were able to make an important contribution to the development of the kinds of interventions that might address the problems that arise in multicultural contexts by formulating and successfully implementing a family-oriented intervention to enhance bicultural skills in all family members (Szapocznik, Santisteban, Kurtines, Perez-Vidal, & Hervis, 1984; Szapocznik, Santisteban, Rio, Perez-Vidal, Kurtines, & Hervis, 1986; Szapocznik, Santisteban, Rio, Perez-Vidal, Santisteban, & Kurtines, 1989). Our work focused on enhancing the bicultural skills that parents and youngsters need to develop: greater competence in managing their cultural differences within the family and successfully functioning in a culturally pluralistic milieu.

For this purpose we integrated our structural systems approach to family therapy (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989) with our cultural understanding of the conflicts presented by these families. We took advantage of the generic structural systems approach to changing family process while using content as a vehicle to achieve desired changes in family interactions. Because for these families the content of conflicts seemed to remain remarkably consistent with regard to differences along cultural lines or alliances, a set of psychoeducational interventions was designed restructuring the family to reduce intergenerational conflict while using culture as a standard content.

The bicultural effectiveness training (BET) approach was developed to be conducted in 12 conjoint sessions. The process that BET uses to bring about structural family change involves two change strategies developed specifically for the BET modality and derived from structural

family therapy concepts (Szapocznik, Santisteban, Kurtines, et al., 1984; Szapocznik, Santisteban, Rio, et al., 1986).

As can be seen in Figure 6, the initial change strategy is to temporarily detour<sup>1</sup> family conflict by placing the focus of both the intergenerational and the intercultural differences on the cultural conflict. Detouring is done by placing the cultural conflict in the identified patient role.<sup>2</sup> Placing the cultural conflict in an identified patient role is brought about by reframing<sup>3</sup> the family's perception of the conflict. Reframing<sup>3</sup> in turn is accomplished by providing the family with a transcultural perspective that emphasizes the communality between parents and their children and by deemphasizing the intergenerational differences (e.g., by teaching that each member has a value position or point of view that is culturally determined). The purposes of this technique are to establish boundaries<sup>4</sup> around the family and to foster a new interactional pattern between parents and adolescents. From a process perspective, detouring is a useful means of loosening the existing rigid generational-cultural alliances (parent-Hispanic and adolescent-acculturated Americanized). The purpose of BET is to bring about more permanent structural changes in family interaction patterns, which is accomplished through the second strategy.

As can be seen from Figure 6, the second BET change strategy, establishing crossed alliances, provides a means of creating new cross alliances between family members and cultures. This is done through exercises designed to make both parents and youths more comfortable with both cultures. Through these exercises, parents are encouraged to accept and understand the value of certain aspects of the American culture represented by their child, and the adolescents are encouraged to accept and understand the value of certain aspects of the Hispanic culture represented by their parents. From a structural perspective, at a process level, enhancing biculturalism in family members is accomplished by creating cross alliances between generations and cultures. The expected outcome after the second change strategy is a reduction in intergenerational conflict and firmer boundaries around the family. Corresponding to the intrafamily change is a new set of family generational-cultural relationships with flexible alliances between parents and both cultures as well as between youths and both cultures.

<sup>1</sup> *Detour*: In family systems, a detour is a communication or conflict between two parties that, rather than traveling directly from one party to the next, is channeled through an indirect route or a third party.

<sup>2</sup> *Identified patient role*: In structural family systems theory, the identified patient is the repository of blame for the family's ailment. A defense mechanism typically used by a system in conflict is to create an identified patient. The bicultural effectiveness training (BET) strategy of placing culture as the repository for the family's ailment draws on a natural proclivity of systems in conflict to create identified patients.

<sup>3</sup> *Reframing* refers to an intervention that creates a new understanding or perspective for an old situation.

<sup>4</sup> *Boundaries* serve to establish or denote the separation between organisms or entities. They indicate or clarify where one organism ends and another begins.

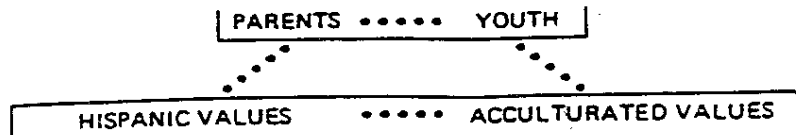
**Figure 6**  
 BET: Two Basic Change Strategies

Initial Conflict



1) Detouring

- (a) Creating an IP: value conflict placed in IP role, blamed for the family's ailment. The intergenerational conflict is reframed by attributing all negative consequences to the cultural conflict.

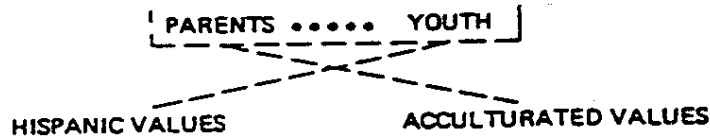


- (b) Reframing: intergenerational relationship is attributed positive consequences (enrichment available from differences), and the family is encouraged to perceive culture conflict as a common foe. Intergenerational cultural conflict between generations are detoured through culture conflict.

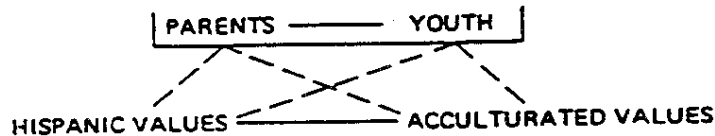


2) Establishing crossed alliances

- (a) Family boundaries are made more permeable at this time to foment crossed alliances and encourage Parent/Acculturated Value and Youth/Hispanic Value relationships. Crossed alliances are expected to further weaken existing generational-cultural alliances.



- (b) By viewing culture conflict as a common foe and by weakening existing generational-cultural alliances new crossed alliances are fostered, the overall level of biculturalism in families is enhanced, and parents and youth strengthen their relationship vis a vis cultural alliances.



**LEGEND**

- CONFLICT      —> DIRECTION OF COMMUNICATION      [ ] FIRM BOUNDARIES AROUND ALLIANCES OR RELATIONSHIPS  
 — COMMUNICATION      [ - ] PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES

Note. BET = bicultural effectiveness training. From "Bicultural Effectiveness Training: A Treatment Intervention for Enhancing Intercultural Adjustment in Cuban American Families" by J. Szapocznik, D. Santisteban, W. M. Kurtines, A. Perez-Vidal, & O. Hervis, 1984, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 6, p. 331. Copyright 1984 by the Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences. Reprinted by permission.

## Conclusion

We have outlined the model of the individual embedded within a family within a context of cultural diversity that we have been using in our work and have illustrated the opportunities it provides for psychological theory, research, and application. As noted, however, the implications of the model extend beyond the particular population that has been the focus of our work. The concept of embeddedness takes on an even greater urgency in view of the broader social, political, and historical trends taking place. This is especially the case as we in America become an increasingly culturally diverse society. If trends continue, the culturally diverse world of the 21st century will be dramatically different from prior eras in American history when our people were equally culturally diverse. In past eras, cultural diversity was rejected by our social, cultural, and political norms; there was pressure for culturally diverse people to blend into an idealized homogeneous stream that was called America. However, in 21st-century America, if current trends continue, culturally diverse people will be respected and, perhaps, even cherished and nurtured. To the extent that we nurture cultural diversity, while promoting interethnic relations, we create a world in which families will be living increasingly at the interface between cultures and customs.

As the context changes, so must our science. Our science will be stretched and will have new opportunities for growth as it incorporates concepts such as the embeddedness of contexts, in which one of these contexts is defined as a culturally diverse society. Ultimately, not only science will benefit from the breakthroughs achieved by using a broader lens, but the vast majority of our people—who are increasingly culturally diverse—will benefit from our findings.

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