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The Cultural Context of Epidemiologic Research¹

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Abstract

This chapter describes Sasao and Sue's research framework (the "cube" model), in which community researchers working in ethnic/cultural communities can make appropriate decisions on conceptual and methodological issues from a culturally anchored, ecological contextualist perspective. The intent of the model is to articulate ethnic-cultural heterogeneity in community research by elucidating three *meta-methodological* issues: (a) definition of an ethnic-cultural community, (b) applicability of cross-cultural theories and methods to ethnic-cultural community research, and (c) geographical or ecological instability of an ethnic-cultural community. The model posits that ethnic-cultural community research can be conceptualized as a three-dimensional structure that represents an interaction among research questions, methods, and *cultural complexity* (referring to the extent to which an ethnic-cultural group is defined in a larger ecological context or community at both the individual and collective levels). Future directions for research are discussed in terms of the utility and the limitations of the proposed research model.

¹Some of the materials in this chapter have been adapted from Sasao and Sue (1993).

Introduction

Despite the increasing recognition of cultural influences on social and health behaviors in recent years (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Landrine & Klonoff, 1992; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993), systematic investigations of the epidemiology of substance use and abuse in ethnic-cultural communities have been sorely lacking and limited (Cheung, 1989; Trimble, Bolek, & Niemczyk, 1992). This is unfortunate because numbers and diversity of various ethnic-cultural groups in the United States are indeed increasing, given high rates of immigration, interethnic or intercultural marriage, and intergroup conflicts, especially in large metropolitan areas. Substance abuse researchers working with ethnic-cultural communities will face a multitude of methodological and conceptual challenges because they are compelled to work with the "vicissitudes of putting the etic to work" in their investigations (Trimble, 1988). The relatively slow progress of substance abuse research in ethnic-cultural communities (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Loo, Fong, & Iwamasa, 1988; Speer et al., 1992; Trickett, 1990) is further aggravated by less than optimal efforts to incorporate values of ethnic-cultural heterogeneity into epidemiological research. In addition, it should be noted that most of the so-called ethnic-cultural research on substance use has focused exclusively on analyses by ethnic glosses or investigator-defined ethnic categories as independent variables, with little or no attention to cultural elements (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Trimble, 1990-1991). Above all, we lack guidelines or directions for conducting epidemiological research in ethnic-cultural communities (Sasao & Sue, 1993; Sue, 1991; Vega, 1992).

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a conceptual and methodological framework in which substance abuse researchers working in various ethnic-cultural or multiethnic communities can make appropriate decisions on conceptual and methodological issues from a culturally anchored, ecological context perspective. To accomplish this broad goal, the chapter begins with the defini-

tion of ethnic-cultural diversity as we conduct community-based research. This brief discussion will be followed by a critical appraisal of problems or common assumptions often made in ethnic-cultural community research. Among other things, these problems are related to (1) the arbitrary definition of an ethnic-cultural community leading to the paucity of a "community" focus in research, (2) the questionable application of cross-cultural methods and concepts to research in ethnic-cultural communities, and (3) the geographical or ecological instability of an ethnic-cultural community across time. Then, a framework for conducting research in ethnic-cultural communities ("cube" model) will be described in which an examination of culturally anchored ecological contexts is stressed by introducing the concept of *cultural complexity*. Finally, based upon the proposed model, several directions for future research as well as the limitations of the model will be discussed.

Understanding Ethnic-Cultural Diversity: A Double-Tiered Phenomenon

What do we mean by "ethnic-cultural diversity"? At its simplest level, the concept of such diversity can be defined as a double-tiered social phenomenon. First, the *within-group* diversity refers to heterogeneity due to changing or diversifying patterns of social attributes or relations in the family, the neighborhood, and/or local communities within ethnic-cultural groups including broadly defined groups or subgroups (e.g., African Americans, Caribbean Blacks; Hispanic/Latino Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans; Asian Americans, Korean Americans, Japanese Americans; and American Indians/Alaskan Natives, Navajo Indians [Office for Substance Abuse Prevention, 1991]). The within-group diversity is further compounded by other social boundaries or orientations such as gay/lesbian issues, women's issues, and political or religious orientations. Also, there are increasing numbers of intergroup (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious) marriages within many ethnic-cultural communities, a

phenomenon that influences many social interactions across groups as well. As noted earlier, generational differences in various ethnic-cultural communities tend to exacerbate the level of heterogeneity within a particular group. Even among non-Hispanic/Latino Whites, sociologist Richard Alba (1990) argues, ethnicity has regained interest because, with the demise of many communist countries and changing world politics, U.S. ethnics began to realize the appropriateness and relevance of national-ethnic identity (e.g., German, Irish, Scots). Therefore, the within-group diversity can be conceptualized either at the micro- or mesosystem level, while being further influenced by the higher order exo- or macrosystem level.

Second, the other type of diversity is conceptualized as the *across- or between-group diversity*, a reflection of increasing complexities brought about by growing intergroup tensions between various social groups in work, school, or everyday situations (Lambert & Taylor, 1990; *Los Angeles Times*, 1992). Although such diversity situations are explicitly more evident in major urban areas, the across-group diversity phenomenon has become of increasing concern on many college campuses and work settings where demographic and social changes have been rather slow until recently. Policy changes due to such across-group diversity have become apparent in student admission or affirmative action employment procedures. For example, the population trends in the United States, when examined from 1980 to 1990, show an obvious example of across-group heterogeneity. There are phenomenal growth rates particularly among ethnic/racial populations (e.g., 127 percent increase for Asian and Pacific Islanders, 69.2 percent increase for individuals from non-Hispanic/Latino origin) and a 66.7 percent increase in the "other race" category. An increase in that category implies increasing within-group diversity simultaneously because there is a substantial number of mixed-heritage individuals across the United States who cannot identify themselves with any of the census-based ethnic-cultural categories (Root, 1992).

The importance of ethnic-cultural diversity or heterogeneity for ethnic-cultural community research is that it creates a serious

dilemma for those who conduct research in ethnic-cultural communities (Sue, 1991; Zane & Sue, 1986). Community researchers working with ethnic-cultural groups are often forced into the defensive position of having to demonstrate that the *etic* model does not constitute a universal and that cultural differences (the *emic*) do make a difference. This itself becomes a problem because ethnic-cultural issues are, by their very nature, paradoxical (Rappaport, 1981). Such issues involve two equally valid but contradictory viewpoints, one emphasizing the importance of differences between cultures and the other stressing the significance of their commonalities. Consequently, it is important to not become too one-sided; otherwise, one perspective dominates to the detriment of the other.

In another important way, ethnic-cultural heterogeneity challenges the traditional notion of a community, as discussed earlier. It is not entirely clear when and how individuals who are ethnically or physiognomically defined members of a certain ethnic-cultural group perceive themselves to be part of that community. Because there are few "communities" whose members are ethnically or culturally homogeneous, "true" community research must define an ethnic-cultural community according to criteria other than racial/ethnic/cultural categories per se, as well as include criteria such as those proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986): perceived membership, a sense of influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. For members of ethnic-cultural groups in the United States, we should note the possibility that some of these individuals can fluctuate in their actual and perceived group membership, depending on various developmental stages and/or diverse behavior settings, such as school classrooms or work situations. Thus, the *fluid* nature of an ethnic-cultural community needs to be recognized. In a multicultural society such as that of the United States, research issues pertinent to ethnic-cultural communities need to be addressed in a way that balances solutions to the paradoxes of various ethnic-cultural and mainstream perspectives within and across groups in a fluid ecological context or community.

Assumptions in Ethnic-Cultural Community Research

Undoubtedly, given the lack of methodological and conceptual guidelines for conducting ethnic-cultural community research (Milburn, Gary, Booth, & Brown, 1991), it is important to focus on improving or innovating existing methods that match research questions at appropriate levels of conceptualization for ethnic-cultural communities to the extent that both external and internal validity would be enhanced (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Seidman, 1988; Shunn, 1990). Nonetheless, above and beyond various methodological issues to be resolved (e.g., gaining community entry, procuring representative samples, reducing measurement bias, increasing respondent compliance), more fundamental *methodological* issues have not been given adequate attention in past research efforts involving ethnic-cultural communities. In other words, because of our traditional research focus on logical positivism, an epistemological perspective that entails the natural-scientific canons of reductionism, experimentation, explanation, operationalization, quantification, and objectivity (Barzun & Graff, 1985), community researchers have been shortsighted in the understanding and articulation of ethnic-cultural diversity and its implications for epidemiological research while failing to meet the needs and concerns of local ethnic-cultural communities. For example, there has been no clear-cut discussion on what constitutes an "ethnic-cultural community." Is it a geographical or relational entity? Provided that ethnic-cultural individuals or groups are socially embedded within a larger societal context (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993), it is imperative to investigate the entire ecological context where a target ethnic-cultural group (e.g., Cuban Americans) and other relevant ethnic-cultural groups (e.g., Korean Americans) coexist. At least three interrelated *methodological* assumptions require immediate attention as ethnic-cultural community research progresses.

Defining an Ethnic-Cultural Community

One prevalent assumption in research with ethnic-cultural communities concerns a *definition* of ethnic-cultural community as it is being used by contemporary researchers. Whereas defining boundaries of a community, be it geographical or relational, has been a major issue of interest within community psychology itself (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986; Chavis, Stucky, & Wanderman, 1983; Newbrough, 1992), the concept of a community, as used in much of the research involving ethnic-cultural groups, has often been equated with a group of individuals (research participants) who possess certain ethnic-cultural markers (e.g., language, skin color, distinct cultural practices). Furthermore, the concept has rarely implied a direct reflection of social, historical, and cultural experiences and values of such ethnic-cultural individuals in community contexts (Evans & Whitfield, 1988; Hall, Evans, & Selice, 1989; Leong & Whitfield, 1992; Olmedo & Walker, 1990).

The majority of community-based ethnic-cultural studies that have appeared in the empirical literature usually address substantive issues (e.g., depression, health status, substance abuse, gang violence) by simply classifying ethnic-cultural populations into broad "ethnic glosses" (e.g., Asian Americans, Hispanics), thus providing research on "ethnic or cultural differences." Even when specific ethnic subgroups (e.g., Caribbean Hispanics) can be identified and studied with sample sizes large enough for acceptable statistical power, research findings are often limited in generalizability to other contexts because large numbers of participants are often recruited, via systematic or captive sampling in such intact ethnic groups as churches, professional associations, or ethnic studies classes on college campuses. In order to obtain larger sample sizes for research, the selection criteria are usually based on race or physiognomic factors *per se*, but there has not been any reference to ecological contexts where the participants reside, work, or study. Therefore, past research has not adequately defined an ethnic-cultural community in a way that captures experiences of ethnic-cultural individuals *in context*.

With the growing promise of an ecological-contextualist epistemology in community research (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Felner, Phillips, DuBois, & Lease, 1991; Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990; Tolan, Keys, Chertok, & Jason, 1990; Trickett, 1990; Watts, 1992), substance abuse researchers must begin defining an ethnic-cultural community within a larger societal context in relation to other relevant ethnic-cultural categories or groups. This is true even when studying a single ethnic-cultural group or category. Otherwise, ethnic-cultural community research is likely to perpetuate an illusion that any ethnic-cultural group automatically forms a community itself by virtue of its ascribed or assumed ethnic or cultural attributes. For example, it is tacitly assumed that once individuals can be identified as belonging to a certain ethnic-cultural group, they share a common understanding of their own ethnicity or culture and identification with the group. There is mounting evidence to suggest, however, that the *population homogeneity assumption* in any ethnic-cultural group may not be valid (Trimble, 1988). Members within a particular group exhibit considerable individual differences on a number of variables, such as acculturation, language skills, generational status, immigration or refugee history, and ethnic self-identification (Phinney, 1991). For instance, a third-generation Mexican American is likely to be very different from a first-generation Mexican immigrant, not simply due to developmental differences in socialization, but also because of current developments in interethnic relations in the United States and/or changes in global or international political situations. In addition, a U.S.-born Mexican individual may also be a member of many different "communities," including ethnic-national, religious-spiritual, occupational, recreational, and political. Therefore, defining a community entails more than classification based on simple ethnic glosses and requires a closer examination of multiple social categories relevant to the individual as well as the community.

As another example, in a recent high school drug use survey conducted in predominantly Chinese, Vietnamese, and Mexican multicultural communities of southern California (Sasao, 1992a), approximately 20 percent of the Chinese students indicated that their primary cultural identification was Mexican. Although the

self-perceived ethnicity of these Chinese youths was Chinese, their cultural identification was Mexican because these youths lived and played in the predominantly Mexican-American community. Moreover, a pattern of such cultural identification was significantly associated with the perception of the school campus' interracial climate. The Chinese students whose cultural identification was more Mexican than Chinese felt that the campus climate was more congenial than those who felt otherwise. Subsequent face-to-face interviews with selected students of Chinese or Mexican background revealed that they both shared a great deal of similarities, such as immigration status and difficulties in mixing with the general student population. Therefore, an ethnic-cultural community must be viewed more as a social-cognitive-cultural-historical-contextual entity than as the one based on physiognomic attributes and/or geographical boundaries *per se* (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). It is often the case that an ethnic-cultural community encompasses more than a single dimension of community attributes, such as geographical, spiritual, or relational attributes (Liu, 1980). This type of definition is consistent with the current thinking of a theory of community in the postmodern world's community psychology (Newbrough, 1992). By defining an ethnic-cultural community in a larger ecological-contextual framework, community researchers should be able to address "true" community phenomena of interest that focus on an interaction among significant social units or entities (Seidman, 1988), such as substance abuse or interethnic climate in work or school settings (Green, Adams, & Turner, 1988; Sasao, 1992a).

Applicability of Cross-Cultural Research Methods and Concepts to Ethnic-Cultural Community Research

A further related, but uncontested, assumption in ethnic-cultural community research is the applicability of cross-cultural (or cross-national) theories and methods to research in ethnic-cultural communities (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992; Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973; Triandis, 1992; Triandis & Lambert, 1980).

Oftentimes, studies comparing different ethnic-cultural groups in the United States are not equivalent to studies involving the comparisons between different national groups. Social groups, including ethnic-cultural groups in the United States, often share the same ecological contexts or settings (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, public facilities) where they *do* interact with each other *by default*. Comparisons between these groups must take into account not only intracultural or intercultural differences, but also differences in the dynamics of social interactions between the groups (e.g., the experience of prejudice and discrimination) in ecological contexts or settings. For example, comparisons between Chinese in China and Whites in the United States are not comparable to those between Chinese Americans and Whites in this country. Although Chinese Americans may well maintain some of the cultural values seen in China, they have also had years of interacting with Whites and other Americans of different backgrounds. Moreover, another layer of complexity can be added to the experience of Chinese Americans that includes animosities based on current and past historical events between China and the United States, which also influences the "texture" of the Chinese-American community. This interaction means that while cross-cultural research can study different groups as independent variables, ethnic-cultural groups in the same context interact and are not independent; thus, in investigating issues of concern in ethnic-cultural communities (e.g., substance abuse or violence), research methods must accommodate both historical and international relations, as well as geographical and relational components.

In addition, some methodological issues are applicable to both cross-cultural psychology research and ethnic-cultural community research. They are typically expressed in terms of the ethnic distinction (Sue, 1991), discussed later in this chapter, which involves such issues as adequacy of sampling procedures, cultural response sets, and conceptual equivalence of measures for different groups. However, unlike cross-cultural research, ethnic-cultural community research has been conducted in an increasingly larger and ethnically diverse societal context, where more than one, single ethnic-cultural community usually coexists. Thus, analytic methods or strategies for investigating phenomena rel-

evant to ethnic-cultural communities must be tempered by the ecological concerns for these communities, such as immediate neighborhoods and school climate. Unfortunately, although the contextualist perspective allows an examination of ecological-contextual factors in community psychology research, there is no methodological provision for incorporating the notion of an "ethnic-cultural group in context" into community research. Such a provision would provide guiding research principles that integrate ethnicity/culture-specific issues, contextual issues, and the dynamics of community infrastructures: for instance, local community leaders and community residents (Milburn et al., 1991; Watts, 1992).

Previous methodological research efforts have focused exclusively on improving psychometric properties of measures for ethnic-cultural groups, ensuring conceptual equivalence across different groups, procuring adequate representative samples, finding appropriate control or comparison groups in intervention-oriented research, enhancing community support for scientifically viable research, gaining community entry, selecting qualitative versus quantitative methods, deciding on information dissemination methods, and improving academic researcher-community relations (Cervantes & Acosta, 1992; Liu, 1980; Marin & Marin, 1991; Milburn et al., 1991; Sue & Morishima, 1982). However, even though these issues have been discussed with respect to population-specific groups identified by broad ethnic categories such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic/Latino Americans (Marin & Marin, 1991; Rogler, 1989; Sue & Morishima, 1982), the growing diversity and heterogeneity of each population requires these population-specific methodological issues to be considered in the larger societal context or ecological setting. For instance, there have been hardly any methodological advances in addressing issues and defining a community with mixed heritage individuals such as Amerasians, the growing, but largely hidden and ignored population in many parts of the United States (Root, 1992). Many basic questions remain unanswered, including whether it is appropriate or possible to define a multicultural or mixed race community for research, or whether a separate community-based research for this often neglected group is warranted.

Geographical or Ecological Instability of an Ethnic-Cultural Community

A third problem or assumption in translating diversity issues into community research is that once a target community is identified in a larger ecological context or community, where it is embedded along with other groups, the ethnic-cultural community remains stable from one such community to another (e.g., an African-American community in Los Angeles is comparable to another in Detroit or Baltimore). However, there is enough evidence to show that ecological factors make huge differences when explaining certain community phenomena from one location to another. For example, alcohol researchers are cautious in generalizing research findings on alcohol use among Japanese Americans in Hawaii to other Japanese Americans in the mainland United States because of different ecological contexts, such as interethnic relations (Johnson & Nagoshi, 1989). In the past, community-based research has generated controversy and condemnation because of divergent views on research issues and methods as represented by the researcher and the local community. Although this concern has led to the development of empowerment and sense-of-ownership notions in community research (Rappaport, 1987), it has been restricted to promoting empowerment *within an ethnic-cultural group* (e.g., empowerment in the Mexican-American community in East Los Angeles), but it has rarely extended to across groups or multicultural groups within a larger ecological context or setting. Thus, community research needs to be conducted with due consideration given to the intricate community process that represents different epistemological orientations of constituents, including community residents, leaders, and politicians of a target ethnic-cultural group and other relevant groups in a specific ecological context or community—for example, Rappaport's "paradoxes in community research" (1987). Also, particularly important for ethnic-cultural communities are generational differences within an ethnic or cultural group. For example, while the local community leadership

in the Japanese-American community is primarily held by second or later generations of Japanese Americans (*nisei* or *sansei*), the business leadership in the same community is often controlled by the first-generation, Japan-born individuals (*skin-issei*). Such generational differences may lead to a different set of local community needs, thereby resulting in divergent views or conflicts about community priorities.

The foregoing discussion indicates that research in ethnic-cultural communities is often fraught with methodological and conceptual issues. These issues not only stem from validity and reliability concerns from the traditional research standpoint, but also are often *meta-methodological* in nature. The meta-methodological issues are concerned with relative inattention to ecological contexts where demographics are constantly and rapidly changing, as well as relative negligence of complex sociopolitical climates in which various stakeholders represent ethnic-cultural communities. This further suggests that basic concepts in community-based research, such as community and race-ethnicity-culture, need to be reexamined in order to guide and promote future research in ethnic-cultural communities. This research should not dwell on such surface or external social categories as skin color or language; however, it should focus on community phenomena represented by a transaction of various units or entities that constitutes a social system or setting, or what Seidman (1988, p. 93) calls *social regularities*, which are "larger than the family or between settings or systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Instead of focusing research exclusively on microsystem levels (such as dyadic or marital relations) in ethnic-cultural "community" research, it is important to generate social regularities (as opposed to individual-based phenomena) for ethnic-cultural or multicultural communities. These regularities can lead to a body of knowledge useful for culturally anchored "community" prevention and treatment interventions. In addition, a trade-off between methodological and substantive significance of research must be negotiated or balanced with such concerns as ethnic-cultural diversity and the needs associated with local communities.

Toward a Culturally Anchored Ecological Framework of Research in Ethnic-Cultural Communities

Ethnic-cultural community research calls for a research framework that provides an integration of methodology and conceptualization that addresses questions relevant to each ethnic-cultural community. It is important that such a community be understood in the larger context of the society where the community of interest is defined and embedded.

The "Cube" Model

Sasao and Sue (1993) proposed a research model in order to articulate ethnic-cultural diversity by incorporating the concept of *cultural complexity*, based on social psychological theories of group behaviors and beliefs: social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986); self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987); and "social representations" (Moscovici, 1984) into the study of community phenomena relevant to *ethnic-cultural groups in contexts*. More specifically, the model attempts to elucidate issues related to three meta-methodological issues discussed earlier: (1) definition of an ethnic-cultural community, (2) applicability of cross-cultural theories and methods to ethnic-cultural community research, and (3) geographical or ecological instability of an ethnic-cultural community. As shown in Figure 1, ethnic-cultural community research can be conceptualized as a three-dimensional figure that represents a transaction among types of research questions being asked, selection of methods, and cultural complexity (referring to the extent to which an ethnic-cultural group is defined in a larger ecological context or community, at both the individual and collective levels). It is argued that in designing and conducting research in ethnic-cultural communities, these three elements will interact to determine the design of a study as well as outcomes; therefore, they must be examined simultaneously and weighed against one another to obtain scientifically valid research, despite constraints due to increasing diversity, as discussed earlier.

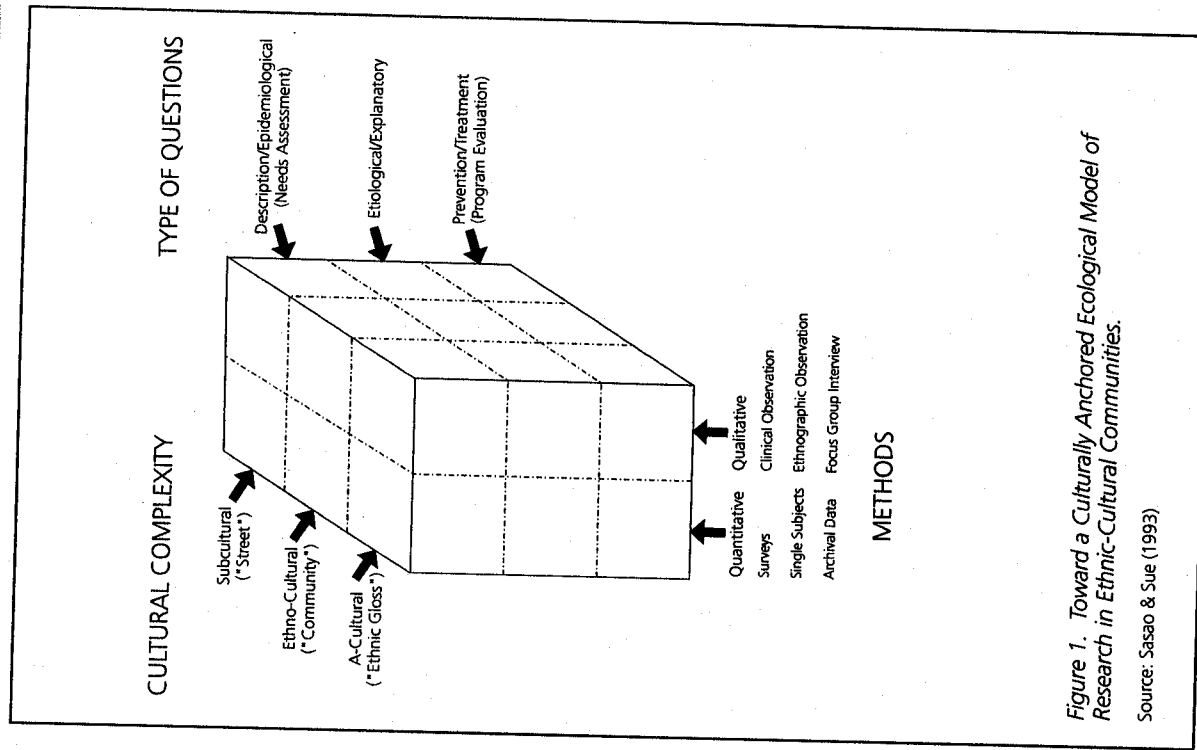


Figure 1. Toward a Culturally Anchored Ecological Model of Research in Ethnic-Cultural Communities.

Source: Sasao & Sue (1993)

Research Questions

Given the needs of local ethnic-cultural communities and researchers' interests, three types of research questions are typically generated. *Descriptive or epidemiological* questions are the first step in any community-based research, usually in the context of community needs assessment. These questions include the following: What is the prevalence of substance abuse among Asian Pacific Americans or African-American communities (Sasao, 1992b)? What kind of mental health needs exist in the low-income Hispanic/Latino community? What patterns of high-risk sexual activities exist among young urban African-American males? Not only are these questions of interest to community researchers, but they also attract the attention of many community-based organizations for local and Federal lobbying and funding purposes.

In addition to epidemiological information, community research also focuses on *etiological or explanatory* issues. Typical questions include these: What is the etiology of substance abuse and early teenage pregnancy among young African-American females living in public housing? Is the lack of life skills a major explanation for poor academic achievement and low self-esteem among Cambodian refugee children and parents (Botvin, 1986; Schinke, Botvin, & Orlandi, 1992)? Are theories of alcohol expectancy applicable to both males and females in the Korean-American community (Goldman, Brown, & Christiansen, 1987). Another question might be what some risk factors are for drug abuse for urban African-American adolescents (Farrell, Danish, & Howard, 1992). In one study, theoretical models were developed to explain social integration and social support among Mexican-Americans and non-Hispanic/Latino Whites (Golding & Baezconde-Garbanati, 1990).

Finally, *prevention/treatment intervention* questions particularly are of greater importance to community-based service providers and program evaluators, as well as to Federal or other funding agencies, especially in view of a tightening economy. For example, the effectiveness of a street-based AIDS prevention and health education program for intravenous drug users in San Francisco's multiethnic communities was investigated (Watters et al., 1990). Another question is what the most effective prevention or treat-

ment modalities for new immigrant youth (e.g., life skills training, stress management, peer support, detoxification, residential programs) would be.

In order to approach some or a combination of these questions, the next obvious step concerns the choice of methods for investigation.

Methods

For ethnic-cultural community researchers, a range of traditional quantitative and qualitative methods (shown in Figure 1) is available in answering the above questions. Although these methods are familiar to social scientists, the applicability of these methods in ethnic-cultural communities needs to be determined based on multiple perspectives on research and the type of research questions asked in a specific ecological context or setting. For instance, although such qualitative methods as ethnographic observation and focus group methods are often viewed with some skepticism by social scientists because of the lack of systematic standards in reliability and validity, certain contexts in which ethnic-cultural groups reside or work call for these qualitative methods because other quantitative methods are perceived as being "not culturally appropriate," or because local communities tend to distrust quantitative methodology, arguing that such research has not taken historical or global considerations of the communities into account. Therefore, merely knowing what questions are being asked and which methods are available and appropriate are not sufficient to conduct community research in ethnic-cultural groups. Notwithstanding that efforts to integrate and systematize qualitative methods are encouraged (Miles & Huberman, 1984) so that they may become amenable to quantitative analysis, it can be argued that the choice of methods in certain ecological contexts is often contingent on the nature of ecological contexts as well as perspectives represented in such contexts.

Cultural Complexity

In this model, the concept of cultural complexity is introduced to allow the identification and assessment of community

phenomena or social regularities in culturally anchored ecological settings (Seidman, 1990). The concept of cultural complexity can be defined at two levels. First, it is defined, at the *individual* level, as the degree to which an individual is defined not only by his or her racial-ethnic-cultural category, but also by his or her own affective, behavioral, and cognitive representation of that social category—which is defined as one's *social identity* in the social psychological literature (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Second, it is conceptualized at the larger, *collective* level of a context or setting (e.g., community, neighborhood, school) where individual members are located or embedded. In fact, past community psychology research should have concerned itself with this extra-individual level of community phenomena (Felton & Shinn, 1992; Seidman, 1990); however, most ethnic-cultural "community" studies found in the literature have focused exclusively on personality or motivation, and interpersonal or family dynamics (Snowden, 1987). At the *collective* (as opposed to *individual* level), the concept of cultural complexity is defined as the extent to which a relevant group entity, such as a predominantly Chinese community or neighborhood, Hispanic/Latino gay/lesbian community, is defined by itself or others vis-à-vis other existing relevant social categories (e.g., an ethnic Vietnamese-Chinese community) within the same ecological setting. The concept here is closely related to social representations in social psychology (Moscovici, 1984) or representations in classical sociology (Durkheim, 1898) because cultural complexity at this level refers to the actual or perceived degree of identification as a group or community at the macrosystem's level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), *not* at the individual or microsystem's level.

In Figure 1, depending upon complexity at these two levels, three layers of cultural complexity can be examined. The first level of cultural complexity can be most appropriately described as *acultural complexity* because researchers collect data based on such physical markers as ethnic glosses or physical characteristics, without regard to the ecological context of the research setting, and analyze data using ethnicity/culture as a categorical variable. Also, the individual members' social identity is blatantly ignored in

collecting and interpreting such data. Unfortunately, the majority of the so-called ethnic-cultural community research falls into this category. In some cases in which this type of ethnic-cultural community research is inevitable, especially when examining archival data collected by other investigators, an extensive analysis must be performed in which both mediating and moderating variables relevant to identified culturally anchored social contexts (e.g., socioeconomic status, crime rates in neighborhoods obtained from the police) are examined by additional data collection and analysis.

The second layer of cultural complexity is *ethnocultural complexity*, in which the community or group being studied must be defined by members of the community or group, not only by the ethnic group of interest, but by members of other ethnic-cultural groups, as well, within the same ecological context. In this clearly identified community, community researchers are required to assess the community members' perception of group identification and cohesion vis-à-vis other relevant social categories in order to establish the definition of a target community. This notion of cultural complexity is perhaps most common in community research with ethnic-cultural groups; however, the focus is usually on one single population, such as Hispanic/Latino residents in inner-city public housing.

In research involving illegal or hidden populations within certain ethnic-cultural groups, such as youth gangs or drug abusers, the next layer of cultural complexity in Figure 1 is important. In the *subcultural context*, individual members are no longer defined according to imposed social categories such as race/ethnicity per se, but sources for the definition of their own subculture and individual members' social identity in that subculture or "street" culture stem from a combination of various cultural elements or categories. For instance, in a Vietnamese gang subculture, heavy substance abuse has been observed by community workers (Sasao, 1992b). Factors related to more than one single culture (i.e., Vietnamese) must be examined in this setting because Vietnamese youths were found to be involved with the Hispanic/Latino or Filipino youth gangs initially, and, therefore, an explanation for Vietnamese gang-related and drug-related behaviors can be best

understood as a combination of multiple cultural elements enmeshed at the street, subcultural context (e.g., Vietnamese family structures, cultural elements learned from Hispanic/Latino or Filipino gang activities, interethnic discrimination experiences).

Thus, the model presented implies that in order to identify and address culturally anchored social regularities, a community needs to be defined by more clearly incorporating the concept of cultural complexity in the research design, such as self-perceived identification with an ethnic/racial category or acculturation status (Trimble, 1988, 1990-1991), or how a community or neighborhood is viewed or defined in the context of other relevant social categories. In defining an ethnic-cultural community for research, we need to go one step beyond external or imposed definition of individuals or groups based on physical characteristics, such as skin color, physical attributes, or geographical dispersion, and view the concept of community as a social-cognitive-contextual entity. The real task for community researchers would be to integrate data that stem from both levels of cultural complexity, that is, the individual and the community, in identifying an ethnic-cultural community.

It is also important to note that decisions about which question is answered by what methods and in what contexts are determined by multiple perspectives represented in a particular research project. In each of these different cultural-complexity contexts, some methods are more feasible and preferable than others. Although a carefully conducted sample survey (a quantitative approach) may yield greater generalizability to other settings, survey techniques could be inappropriate to use with youth gang members in the subcultural, street ecological context. In sampling "hidden and rare" populations, such as the homeless mentally ill (Koegel, Burnam, & Farr, 1986) or intravenous drug abusers living on skid rows, such appropriate qualitative methods as a key informant survey, a focus group, or participant observation may be used to obtain proxy "epidemiological" data. Although these methods do not provide entirely accurate estimates, they are helpful in generating initial exploratory hypotheses about these populations, and also are complementary to more traditional quantitative methods.

By examining how three dimensions (type of research questions, methods, and cultural complexity) transact with each other, potential solutions to some of the overarching issues discussed previously may be obtained. For instance, most of the claims or social stereotypes or sources of misunderstanding regarding the low substance abuse among Asians (Zane & Sasao, 1992) appear to be based on either inadequate methodology or inappropriate cultural contexts where research was conducted, or a combination of both. Because Asian substance abusers are usually hidden in Asian ethnic communities (Sasao, 1992b), using a traditional survey method in an ethnic-cultural community would not provide an accurate estimate of alcohol and drug abuse in a certain Asian community. For example, we might begin identifying and defining certain social regularities or contexts in which Asians find themselves likely to use alcohol or drugs (e.g., when alone, when with other male friends, or on cultural festive occasions), and then conduct an extensive ethnographic study to generate hypotheses prior to investigating epidemiological questions.

Furthermore, the use of multiple methods is desired, whenever possible, because using multiple methods not only leads to validation of findings, but also pushes for ecological validation as an ongoing process of testing assumptions about a certain phenomenon in different culturally anchored ecological contexts of research. Similarly, Trickett, Watts, and Birman (1992) argue that an ecological approach needs to serve as a heuristic as we integrate diversity issues into community psychology research, and also that the reemergence of the social constructionist and contextualist philosophy of science, as an alternative to logical positivism, can be seen as a societal recognition that ethnic-cultural diversity has become an issue that must be incorporated into our community-based research.

Implications for Future Research

The model presented in this chapter suggests some courses of action for future research in ethnic-cultural communities, including the following:

- In conceptualizing and designing research projects, researchers working in ethnic-cultural communities should consciously be guided by a consideration of interrelated factors, such as the ones we have identified in the "cube" model involving cultural complexity, methodology, and type of questions being addressed. The model also provides some directions in the course of research. For example, in the case of ethnic-cultural groups in which little research has been conducted, it may be wise for investigators to initially focus on descriptive questions, use more qualitative methods, and examine the groups using low levels of cultural complexity. Such research may help to establish a baseline of knowledge, identify relevant parameters and variables prior to more intensive study, and gain insight into the appropriate methodologies and instruments to use.
- Future investigations of a target ethnic-cultural group should begin collaborating with other ethnic-cultural groups because any one ethnic-cultural community does not exist by itself in the everyday, ecological context or setting, but it exists amid other groups whose presence does influence social regularities of interest to community researchers. For instance, in studying interethnic relationships between Asian Americans and Whites, one should not ignore the impact of African Americans and other groups in the relationships. Kitano (1985) has argued that to understand the status of Asian Americans, the stratification between African Americans and Whites is also important to study because he conceives of Asian Americans as a "middleman" minority—a buffer between dominant and subordinate groups.
- Because of the practical problems involved in ethnic-cultural group research (e.g., difficulties in finding adequate samples), it may not be possible to appropriately study various levels of cultural complexity for ethnic-cultural groups. For example, research on urban American Indians can be directed to the group as an aggregate, to members of certain tribes, or to people who live in certain areas of a city. As the group is further divided on

the basis of subcultural units of cultural complexity, it may be increasingly difficult to find adequate sample sizes. This is one reason why simple rather than more complex levels of cultural complexity have been studied most frequently; however, in such research contexts, qualitative methods such as participant observation and focus group approaches can be used. The model can provide a practical means of categorizing research contributions and of demonstrating the state of knowledge. What levels of cultural complexity have guided our knowledge of ethnic-cultural groups? What research questions and methods have primarily been used to address which questions? Where are the most important gaps in the cube model for a particular group? Thus, the model provides a "context" for understanding the state of the research for conducting ethnic-cultural community research.

- Because the proposed model implies ecological flexibility or fluidity of one's ethnic identification and an ethnic-cultural community to which he or she belongs, future research on ethnic identity and acculturation may take new directions. For example, although past research has focused on the development of ethnic identification or acculturation scales for different ethnic-cultural individuals (Burnam, Telles, Hough, & Escobar, 1987; Suinn, Richard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987), there is now a clear need for including specific contexts in which the level of acculturation is measured (e.g., school, home, public versus private places, work settings) because the effect of acculturation may differ in various contexts (Ethier & Deaux, 1990).

Another consideration for research on ethnic identification and acculturation is the developmental or historical implications of the concepts. Most of the identity or acculturation measures have been developed to measure the concepts *at one particular point in time*. However, the idea of cultural complexity in the cube model clearly suggests that ethnic identification and acculturation both at the individual and the community levels can be conceptualized as having stability, duration, and permanence (Deaux, 1993).

The static concepts of ethnic identification and acculturation must be reevaluated or replaced to accommodate changes due to passage of time and significant historical events (e.g., the 1992 Los Angeles riots).

A third factor in reconceptualizing ethnic identification and acculturation is a recognition that the behavioral focus of the measures must be juxtaposed with other dimensions or domains, such as affective or cognitive aspects of ethnic identity and acculturation. For instance, it is possible that an individual "behaviorally" uses English almost all the time (which most acculturation measures indicate as the attainment of high acculturation); however, it could be a reflection that he or she simply spends more time in the English-speaking contexts and, rather, wishes to use his or her native language more often. Thus, the individual's affective level of language use needs to be assessed in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of an individual's acculturation.

Finally, the cube model can serve as a convenient way to identify limitations in a study. Researchers who apply research findings derived from the acculturation to the subcultural level are ignoring individual differences, whereas those who conduct research at the subcultural level and draw implications to the acculturation level may be overgeneralizing. In essence, the cube model serves a heuristic and conceptual purpose in helping to define what kinds of research have been conducted, the appropriateness of conclusions, and gaps in our knowledge.

Limitations of the Model

The proposed conceptual-methodological model has limitations. First, it is not intended to be the only appropriate model. Indeed, many other variables and dimensions can be identified as being important. We have presented this model only to illustrate how ethnic-cultural community research in the past has typically been based on inappropriate meta-methodological assumptions, including ambiguous definitions of an ethnic-cultural community. Even though such research has been valuable, ethnic-cultural research has evolved to the point where issues of heterogeneity and different ethnic "senses" of community should now be addressed.

Moreover, the model cannot intrinsically offer insights into the best research questions to ask, methods to use, or cultural complexities to examine. Descriptive or explanatory research each has certain merits; qualitative research is not necessarily less sophisticated than, or an earlier stage of, quantitative research—and acculturation research can be as valuable as subcultural research. Human judgment and experience is needed to render such insights. The model offers a means of organizing and conceptualizing ethnic-cultural research endeavors so that the types of research, research problems, and the implications from findings are more explicitly conceptualized and approached.

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Culturally Specific Approaches to Knowing, Thinking, Perceiving, and Understanding

Kenneth H. Cushner, Ph.D.

The term *world view* generally refers to the manner in which a cultural group perceives people and events. Understanding an individual's or group's world view enables one to gain a perspective on another's experience, on one's willingness to be open to other points of view, on one's ability to communicate in a manner that is understood by another, and on one's willingness to accept guidance and direction from others. Ultimately, such understanding facilitates agreeing on the meaning of certain events, including acknowledging that a problem exists and that a way should be found to approach the healing process. Gaining such an understanding is a complex and rather extensive process about which volumes have been written. This chapter surveys this broad area in an attempt to equip professionals with broadened skills in analysis, interpretation, and communication. Deriving a world view results from the interaction of a conceptual system and certain philosophical assumptions about the world. Although these underlying assumptions are often hidden from one's conscious awareness, they have a significant impact on the development and emergence of the self and one's belief system. Concepts of the self are inextricably bound together and interdependent—that