

## CHAPTER 15

# *Cultural Diversity in the Development of Child Psychopathology*

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To more deeply understand the role of culture in the emergence, persistence, and desistance of psychopathology among children and youth, this chapter examines cultural diversity in child and adolescent psychopathology and its development. Based on a selective review of recent comparative studies, we present a synthesis of cross-cultural and ethnic differences that stood out amid the similarities also found. We examine culture's role in child psychopathology and its development through an examination of cultural diversity. Our specific aims are (1) to review and synthesize the findings of recent comparative studies that examined cultural variations in the expression of symptomatology, prevalence, development, and correlates of psychopathology in children and adolescents; (2) to report related findings from ethnic and cultural studies that sampled only one population; (3) to identify conceptual and methodological issues identified in the studies reviewed; and (4) to suggest future directions for research.

### **A DEVELOPMENTAL-CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE ON PSYCHOPATHOLOGY**

The developmental approach to psychopathology, more commonly known as developmental psychopathology, asserts that because there is unity in development, the study of psychopathology or development gone awry in infants, children, and adolescents has to be based on knowledge of normal development and should involve the application of developmental principles. A corollary to this assertion is that research on development gone awry can enhance our understanding of normal development. Therefore, the field of developmental psychopathology focuses on the interplay between normal and abnormal development and on the relationship between deviant and typical forms of a behavior. Like other attempts to describe and explain psychopathology, the developmental approach seeks to understand the etiology, course, and prognosis of a specific

disorder. However, its interests extend beyond the identification of predisposing, precipitating, and maintaining factors or risk and protective variables. This approach also seeks to ascertain the internal and external factors that promote competency and resiliency in individuals. Most important, the developmental approach is concerned with describing the developmental sequence of a particular disorder and understanding the processes as well as mechanisms involved. Consistent with a transactional model of the developmental process, the emergence of psychopathology is conceptualized as occurring through a dynamic transaction with intra- and extraorganismic forces (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995). Acknowledging these forces implies that developmental psychopathology views deviant behavior in context. Thus, it is congruent with a developmental-contextual perspective. Contexts vary; they may be intraorganismic or extraorganismic. An intraorganismic context is organic, involving biologically based characteristics (e.g., genes, brain, central nervous system) and an intrapersonal context involving personal characteristics (e.g., cognitions, emotions, personality). An extraorganismic context subsumes an interpersonal context involving social interactions and relationships (e.g., family, peers) and a superordinate context comprising variables that deal with aggregates of individuals taken as a unit (e.g., ethnic group, social class, culture; Wenar & Kerig, 2000). These different contexts may be considered separately for purposes of analysis, but they are really interrelated (Lerner, 1995). The focus of this chapter is on one type of superordinate context, namely, culture. A cultural perspective to developmental psychopathology necessitates that normal and abnormal development as well as typical and deviant forms of behavior be considered from the standpoint of both dominant mainstream culture and the minority cultures. A developmental-contextual approach is compatible with this perspective.

## CULTURE

Culture refers to the designs for living in a specific habitat that have evolved among a particular group of people and are transmitted within and between generations (M. Cole & Cole, 2004). It refers to the entire way of life of a society including its values, beliefs, attitudes, norms, practices, language, religion, and institutions. These designs for living are represented through artifacts, actions, or symbols. North's (1990, p. 37) definition of culture as "a language-based conceptual framework for encoding and interpreting information that the senses are presenting to the brain" em-

phasizes its symbolic nature. There is shared meaning among those who have the same culture. Their view of the world and its people and how they think and make judgments in general or specific areas of life are filtered through a culturally based information system (Goode-nough, 1989).

The term "culture" is usually employed to designate the designs for living among individuals who, frequently but not always, share a common biological ancestry and, initially occupied a particular habitat, namely, an ethnic group. It is in this sense that the term is used in this chapter, though it is acknowledged that the term may also be extended to the values, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and practices common to members of a distinctive group identifiable through a shared characteristic such as gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, or profession.

### Assumptions about Culture

Assumptions about culture have implications for both the research enterprise itself and the applications of research findings.

*Culture has an ecological context.* The designs for living that constitute an ethnic group's culture are assumed to have evolved because they facilitated adaptation to the group's habitat at a particular time. Thus, the origins of an ethnic group's designs for living and their functions are tied to specific spatial, social, and temporal contexts. This implies that the adaptive value of a specific design for living is relative to context.

*At any given time and context, cultural practices are likely to differ in their adaptive value and those that remain prominent in an ethnic group's cultural repertoire may not necessarily be the ones with optimal value for adaptation.* It is therefore important to assess the current adaptive value of a cultural belief or practice in its contemporary context. Earlier, social scientists assumed that the cultural values, beliefs, and practices that survive are those that are optimally effective in facilitating adaptation. Contemporary researchers have challenged this assumption. According to Ellen (1982, p. 251), "Cultural adaptations are seldom the best of all possible solutions and never entirely rational." Using recent findings from cognitive science to bolster his contentions, Edgerton (2000) also argued that traditional beliefs and practices may persist not because they are optimally beneficial but because they generally may work well enough without further changes; they are retained in the cultural repertoire because they require the least effort and involve minimal risk. He also cautioned behavioral and social scientists

about assuming that any persistent traditional belief or practice in a surviving society must be adaptive. It would be more prudent to assume, he contended, that there is a continuum of adaptive value along which any belief or practice may fall anywhere. A belief or practice may simply be neutral or tolerable, or it may be beneficial to some members of a society while harming others, and sometimes it may even harm everyone.

*Culture persists, transmitted from one generation to the next, but the adaptive value of specific cultural variables may change over time.* Initially, it was assumed that the designs for living that make up culture persist because their ecological effectiveness is constant across time and space (Campbell, 1975; Harris, 1960; Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1962). However, contexts change over time and, consequently, the adaptive values of cultural beliefs and practices, even those that were optimally effective at one time, may also shift.

*Culture is dynamic rather than static.* Previous conceptualizations of culture assumed that it remains static as it is passed on intra- and intergenerationally. However, the nature of individuals and contexts changes over time, and culture becomes modified accordingly. Cultural practices can be altered within a generation, as evidenced by recent changes in American food preferences, or modified across generations. Even when an ethnic group remains in the same geographic context over time, changes can come about through the transactions of the group's members with one another or with members of other ethnic groups and with changes in the physical, social, and technological environments. Changes in the physical environment might necessitate modifications in the means of livelihood and, consequently, in the associated cultural practices. For example, in some areas of the world, polluted waters have made fishing a less lucrative source of income, thus necessitating an occupational change that may, in turn, result in modifications of certain cultural practices that evolved from a fishing economy.

*Culture is mediated through social interactions.* Initially, this occurs through the parent-child relationship and subsequently through other interpersonal transactions taking place in various ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Transmission occurs through both verbal and nonverbal modes of communications, directly and indirectly. Children learn cultural values and problem-solving strategies by listening to their mother reading folk tales or to their father and other male adults exchanging stories, but also through observation of adults' attitudes, feelings, and behavioral responses to specific events. Through adult didactic instructions or nonverbal reactions, children learn

what is permissible action and emotional expression and what is not, and later infer that there are group norms governing such actions and emotional expressions. From an early age, in addition to these intersubjective experiences, culture is experienced by the child through exposure to various types of media, schooling, and socialization avenues.

*Cultural knowledge and practice are not uniformly distributed among members of an ethnic group.* Because members of an ethnic group share common values, beliefs, and practices, it used to be assumed that these were uniformly distributed across members. Weisner (2000, p. 141) has disputed this assumption of cultural uniformity, stating that "cultures may have a clear central tendency and normative pattern but they are hardly monolithic and uniform." Within an ethnic group, there are usually subgroups based at least on geography and social class. Within these various subgroups, there may be differential transmission, translation, and implementation of core values and beliefs. Even among members of the same subgroup, there are individual differences in the extent to which they have absorbed cultural values, beliefs, and practices. These individual differences are the result of several factors, including individual characteristics, differential socialization experiences, and differences among their parents' interpretations or implementations of cultural prescriptions. To paraphrase Kluckhohn and Murray (1953), a member of an ethnic group may be like all members of that group, like some members, and like no other members. Cultural uniformity cannot be taken for granted. Cultural knowledge and adherence among members of an ethnic group is characterized by diversity amid unity.

### Culture as an Explanatory Variable

Before elucidating the significance of culture for development and psychopathology, a discussion of the controversy regarding culture as an explanatory variable seems warranted. The concept of culture is most often used simply as a descriptive variable, that is, as a category, index, or marker that serves to describe and distinguish values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of one ethnic group from another. But the concept has also served as a dependent variable and also as an independent variable. It is a dependent variable, for example, in a study of the effects of schooling on women's definitions of gender roles, whereas it has the status of an independent variable in quasi-experimental studies that, for example, examine women's responsiveness to schooling as a function of their ethnic group's gender role definitions. It is culture's research function as an independent or explanatory variable that has encour-