

# The Multiple Contexts of Middle Childhood

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## SUMMARY

During middle childhood, children begin to navigate their own ways through societal structures, forming ideas about their individual talents and aspirations for the future. The ability to forge a positive pathway can have major implications for their success as adults. The pathways to success, however, may differ for children of diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. This article provides a conceptual model of child development that incorporates the contextual, racial, and cultural factors that can play critical roles for children who are not part of mainstream society. Key observations emerging from this model include the following:

- ▶ It is the interplay of the three major derivatives of social stratification—social position, racism, and segregation—that creates the unique conditions and pathways for children of color and of immigrant families.
- ▶ A segregated school or neighborhood environment that is inhibiting due to limited resources may, at the same time, be promoting if it is supportive of the child’s emotional

and academic adjustment, helping the child to manage societal demands imposed by discrimination.

- ▶ The behavioral, cognitive, linguistic, and motivational deficits of minority and immigrant children are more appropriately recognized as manifestations of adaptive cultures, as families develop goals, values, attitudes, and behaviors that set them apart from the dominant culture.

Society should strive to promote positive pathways through middle childhood for all children, regardless of their background, by ensuring access to critical resources now and in the future. The authors conclude by suggesting various strategies for working with children of color and children of immigrant families to accomplish this goal.

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Middle childhood, from 6 to 12 years of age, is a crucial stage in development when children begin to have sustained encounters with different institutions and contexts outside of their families and to navigate their own way through societal structures. It is during this period that children develop a sense of competence, forming ideas about their abilities, the domains of accomplishment they value, and the likelihood that they will do well in these domains.<sup>1</sup> In particular, a child's academic self-perceptions emerge and consolidate in middle childhood,<sup>2</sup> contributing to academic attainment in middle school and beyond. Thus, during middle childhood the development of positive attitudes toward school, academic achievement, and aspirations for the future can have major implications for children's success as adults.

In light of the changing demographics of the childhood population in the United States, it is critical to understand how successful developmental pathways may differ for children of diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. During middle childhood, children of color and of immigrant backgrounds may, for the first time, directly experience exclusion, devaluation, invisibility, discrimination, and racism and these may become important potential sources of influence on their interactions and reactions to "mainstream" society.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while similar developmental competencies are required of all children, those from non-mainstream backgrounds, or "outsiders," may follow different developmental pathways.<sup>4</sup> Experiences within the family, institutions, and communities create particular realities for such children that need to be better understood in order to provide appropriate supports to ensure their success.<sup>5</sup>

This article explores when and under which circumstances children are likely to form healthy ethnic/racial identities in spite of negative messages from society,<sup>6</sup> and why some succeed academically while others, in the same schools and from the same backgrounds, do not. Available research documents that children of color generally are overrepresented in high-risk categories, and that economic disadvantage plays a major role in these outcomes.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, research also shows that, while children of immigrants generally share a relatively low status in the social stratification system in this country, they are physically healthier, work harder

in school, and have more positive social attitudes than their non-immigrant peers.<sup>8</sup>

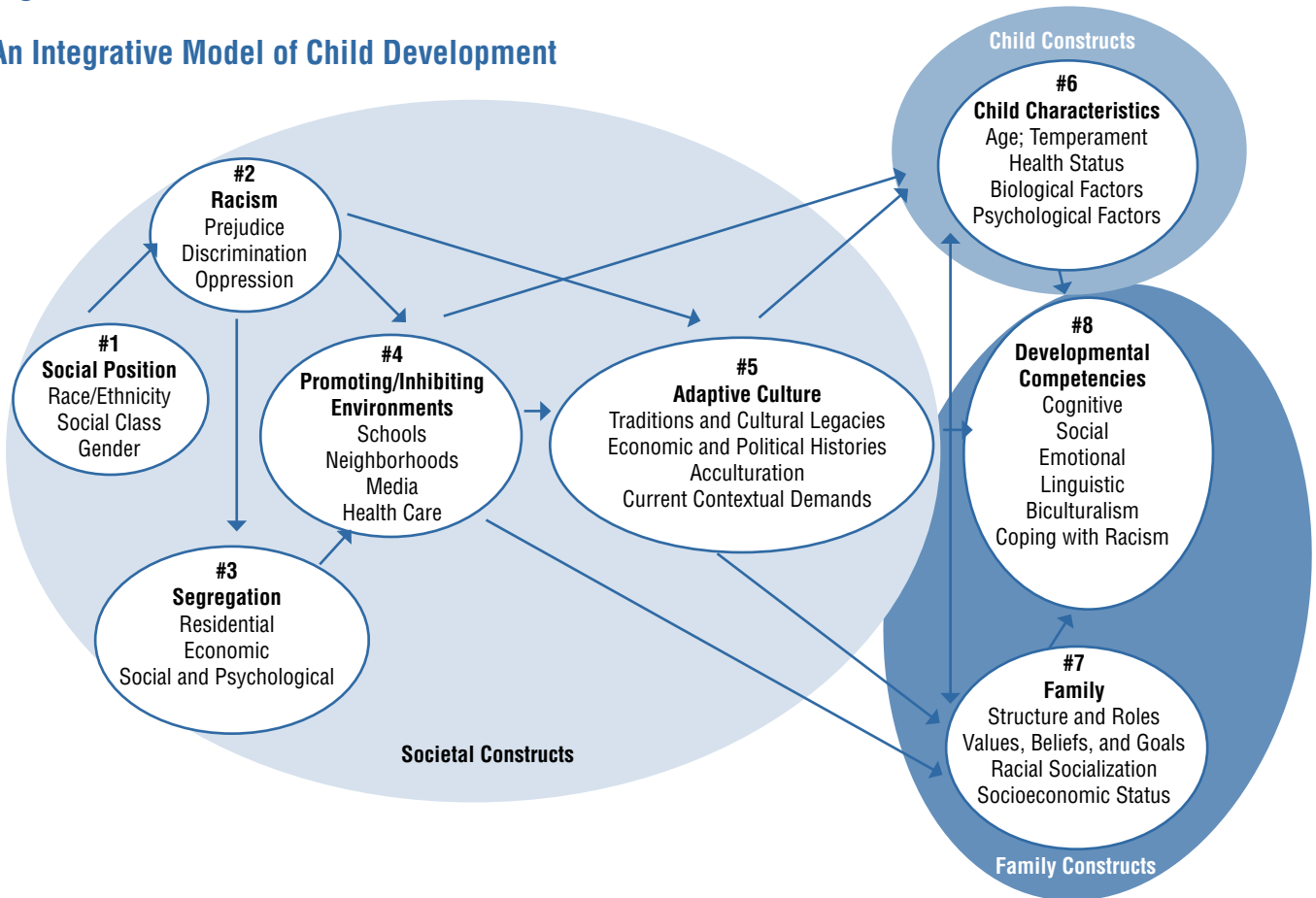
To understand the differences in outcomes among children of color and children of immigrants, new ways of thinking are required. Very few studies have examined the role that contextual, racial, and cultural factors play in children's development during middle childhood,<sup>9</sup> largely because traditional models of child development do not include such factors. Yet for children of color and of immigrant backgrounds, such factors can be extremely important. Therefore, this article begins with a description of a conceptual model for incorporating these factors into the study of developmental competencies for children of color and children of immigrant backgrounds. Particular attention is paid to the aspects of the model that are most relevant to children in the growing minority groups of the United States (Latinos, Asians, and recent immigrants), especially those between the ages of 6 and 12. The risks and benefits of growing up in diverse contexts are then discussed, based on the limited research available. The article concludes by examining some of the implications of the theoretical framework for social policies and programs, and for future research.

## The Conceptual Framework

The model presented here expands on an "ecological" and "interactionist" approach to child development, which maintains that children's development is influenced not only by family systems, but also by other institutions with which the child and family interact.<sup>10</sup> The model is unique in that it draws from both mainstream developmental frameworks, as well as models specific to children of color, to explain how ecological factors such as social position, culture, and the media, affect developmental contexts.<sup>11</sup> Eight major constructs are hypothesized to influence developmental processes for children of color and children of immigrant families who share outsider status. (See Figure 1.) A fundamental assumption of the model is that cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development is profoundly affected by the child's social position within a socially-stratified society replete with racism and discrimination, and by the promoting or inhibiting nature of the child's school and neighborhood.

Figure 1

## An Integrative Model of Child Development



### Social Stratification

Although the role of social position is crucial, its influence on developmental outcomes and children's immediate environments is not direct. It is the interplay of the three major derivatives of social stratification—social position, racism, and segregation—that create the unique conditions confronted by outsider children, and it is these “non-shared” experiences with mainstream populations that define the unique pathways of development for children of color and children of immigrants.

Racism, in particular, is a pervasive and systemic reality in modern American society, inextricably linked to processes of social, political, and economic domination and marginalization.<sup>12</sup> Including racism and its derivatives

of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression at the core of conceptualizing normal (or “normative”) development for outsider children enables the illumination of particular causal mechanisms in development that have been ignored by other models. Most broadly defined, racism is “any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, or any other field of public life.”<sup>13</sup>

Several studies have documented the presence and consequences of institutional racism.<sup>14</sup> During middle childhood, children likely begin to perceive the presence

**[One] study found that some African American and Latino children refused to learn in school because they believed that doing so meant that they were accepting a cultural system that categorized them as inferior.**

of racism in their environments. For example, in a study of Puerto Rican children, by the age of 9 or 10, some children started identifying racism as a possible explanation for negative interpersonal interactions between teachers and students, and between peers.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the study found that the children who reported having been discriminated against had significantly higher teacher interaction stress and greater depression, and their parents reported greater difficulties in the children's behavioral adjustment.

As a social phenomenon, racism is multifaceted and its manifestations are constantly changing. It can vary in its expression from institutionalized racism to symbolic racism. Historically, institutionalized racism was maintained by legal barriers that barred children of color from access to certain institutions. Now, society overall increasingly supports the principle of ethnic or racial equality, but often a set of moral abstractions and attitudinal predispositions are still maintained concerning how children of color ought to behave and what they deserve. Thus, symbolic racism persists—that is, the unspoken, covert, differential treatment of members of minority groups by members of the mainstream culture.<sup>16</sup> Such symbolic racism is likely to take the form of providing fewer resources to institutions serving children of color and children of immigrants, and subjecting them to patronizing attitudes. These subtle manifestations of racism can permeate the daily interactions between these outsider children and those of the dominant culture.

### **Promoting and Inhibiting Environments**

Irrespective of cultures, ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, children are exposed to similar kinds of settings during middle childhood. Schools, neighborhoods, popular media, and other institutions directly influence the nature of specific individual family processes, and interact with the children's biological, constitutional and psychological characteristics to either promote or inhibit their development.<sup>17</sup> The structure, function, and relative importance of these institutions

for the development of competencies vary according to the extent to which they are beset by poverty and segregation, and the institutional values and goals.<sup>18</sup> Inhibiting contexts can result from inadequate resources, which, in turn, create conditions that undermine the development of children's competencies. In addition, a child's development can be negatively affected by a conflict between institutional ideologies and cultural or familial values.<sup>19</sup> Promoting environments, on the other hand, can result both from an adequate number and quality of resources, and from the compatibility between the values, goals, and expectations of the children and their families with those held in the particular environments.

### **School**

School is perhaps the most critical arena in which development during middle childhood occurs and where children's futures are molded. As all children enter school, they experience both increased individual freedom and heightened demands that they are in control of their own behavior.<sup>20</sup> The school contexts themselves can be understood as a series of nested environments: 1) the individual classrooms (including child, teacher and peer characteristics, classroom structure, curriculum and instructional strategies); within 2) the individual schools (including school resources and personnel); within 3) the school district or system (including organizational and instructional philosophies, policies and procedures).<sup>21</sup> Each of these nested environments can be inhibiting, promoting, or both. For example, schools can be experienced as inhibiting environments to the extent that have inadequate resources, such as substandard teachers and learning materials, while—perhaps simultaneously—they can be experienced as promoting environments to the extent they adequately respond to children's social, emotional and educational needs.

Segregation immediately influences the inhibiting and promoting environments that children of color and immigrants experience. Schools serving primarily

children of color, for example, are likely to have fewer resources, lower teacher expectations and patronizing attitudes, biased curricula and textbooks,<sup>22</sup> and a lack of bilingual classrooms and programs. Researchers with the Harvard Civil Rights project have documented a growing trend toward re-segregation, and the emergence of a substantial group of American schools composed entirely of children of color which they label “apartheid schools.”<sup>23</sup> More often than not, these schools are mired in enormous poverty, limited resources, and have a high concentration of social and health problems of many types.

Beyond the presence of lack of resources, another crucial influence on the development of middle-school-age children is the web of relationships with peers and teachers known as “school connectedness.”<sup>24</sup> Feeling connected with teachers and peers, and believing that others care about their welfare and “like them,” has been found to be positively related to both academic motivation and achievement, especially among this

age group.<sup>25</sup> For example, in a study that captured the views of 233 children ages 6 to 11 years from 15 different shopping malls across the country, researchers found that the children yearned for relationships with engaged adults.<sup>26</sup>

A segregated school environment that is inhibiting due to limited resources may, at the same time, be promoting if it is supportive of the child’s emotional and academic adjustment, helping the child to manage societal demands imposed by discrimination. In such a segregated but supportive, or “consonant” environment, outsider children are not only protected from the prejudice of the dominant culture, but are in a congenial context surrounded by others like themselves. Where there is compatibility between the school and family cultural background, studies show positive effects on student achievement and school satisfaction. For example, in a review of the socio-cultural compatibility of classrooms with children’s natal cultural patterns, greater compatibility was associated with greater learning.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, an integrated school environment, while perhaps offering greater resources, may at the same time expose children to greater discrimination and unfamiliar contexts with others who are different from them. One study found that children in such dissonant classrooms often experienced a lower sense of self-esteem.<sup>28</sup> Another study found that some African American and Latino children refused to learn in school because they believed that doing so meant that they were accepting a cultural system that categorized them as inferior.<sup>29</sup> To overcome the dissonance and develop culturally compatible classrooms, research shows that it is important to have varied activity settings, along with a respectful and accommodating sensitivity to students’ varied knowledge, experience, values, and tastes.<sup>30</sup>

For children of immigrants, schools are usually the first major institution encountered outside their homes. As such, schools serve as quintessential agencies of acculturation, with profound consequences for the future status of these children.<sup>31</sup> Schools shape not only what these children learn, but also their motivations and aspirations to learn. Research assessing school engagement among children from immigrant backgrounds upon entry to school, and again during adolescence, has found that these children enter the educational

system with very positive attitudes toward school and education.<sup>32</sup> By adolescence, however, the initial positive attitudes toward school can change into disillusionment and negative attitudes toward teachers and scholastic achievement.<sup>33</sup> Some groups and individuals remain optimistic and trust the academic system, while others do not.

Very little systematic research has been conducted examining how the different school variables are related to the development of social and academic competencies of children of color and children of immigrants, and how identity issues and schooling issues interact over time. Students' identity may be independent of school at some point and then may become intertwined with school as time goes by. Understanding the circumstances during middle childhood that support or undermine the initial affirmative attitudes toward school might point to ways to keep outsider children on positive academic pathways.

### Neighborhood

A second vital context of children's development during middle childhood is the neighborhood in which they grow up. This is where they learn to interact with peers, develop skills, and cultivate a sense of belonging. Well-appointed neighborhoods with large tax bases provide opportunities for enrichment in libraries and after-school programs. Children living in these neighborhoods who participate in such extracurricular activities are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, low-income neighborhoods tend to offer fewer enrichment activities for youth. Moreover, because such neighborhoods are often physically dangerous, parents may isolate their children—keeping them safe in their homes, but at the same time, lessening their peer interactions.<sup>35</sup> Even when the children in such neighborhoods participate in structured extracurricular activities, research shows the results to be more mixed.<sup>36</sup>

The extent of residential segregation in the United States highlights the need to look closer at neighborhood characteristics when explaining developmental outcomes in children of color and children from immigrant backgrounds. A good deal of research documents the relationship between negative outcomes, such as problem behaviors, and poverty-stricken, disadvantaged neighborhoods.<sup>37</sup> From a resources perspective, the ten-

dency would be to label such neighborhoods as solely inhibiting environments. However, these environments can actually be promoting as well as inhibiting. From a social support perspective, segregated neighborhoods can sometimes support children's developing social, academic and psychological competencies by buffering them from the negative influences of mainstream society.<sup>38</sup>

For example, recent research in Chicago neighborhoods found that when home and neighborhood cultures are physically or linguistically isolated from the larger society, greater social cohesion may result, which is associated with lower levels of neighborhood violence.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, when children of color and of immigrant backgrounds grow up in integrated middle-class neighborhoods, they might enjoy sufficient resources and economic stability, but the community may not buffer the effects of prejudice, racism, and discrimination to which "outsider" children may be exposed, both from within and outside of the community.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, children develop subsistence tasks and acquire instrumental competencies—that is, the skills and abilities required for adult economic, political, and social roles—according to their surroundings.<sup>41</sup> Children of color who grow up in a poor, all Dominican neighborhood, for example, may not have access to adequate resources such as adequate schools, health care, and after-school programs, but the community can still provide support in developing the instrumental competencies necessary to survive outside of that community. Through interaction with kin and others who serve as brokers within the larger society, children can learn both traditional patterns of behavior as well as the mechanisms to interact successfully with more mainstream institutions.

### Popular Media

On a daily basis, children absorb and interact with messages from a wide range of popular media, including television, movies, music lyrics and videos, magazines, video games and the Internet. Through the presence and absence of particular information, media can communicate powerful messages about race, class, and gender identity. Educational, entertainment, and commercial messages shape young viewers' perceptions of the world and contribute to their preparation for



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academic, social, and civic life. One recent study found children in middle childhood, ages 8 to 13, to be the most avid media consumers, with more average media exposure than any other age group between 0–18.<sup>42</sup>

According to one synthesis of the research, the lower the family's socioeconomic status (SES), the more television generally is watched by the children.<sup>43</sup> Children of color and children of immigrants also tend to watch more television: Within the same SES groups, studies suggest that African American and Hispanic children watch more television compared with white non-Hispanic children, and that foreign-born children watch more television than native children. This may be because these families have access to fewer alternatives to home entertainment, but it may also be because they use television differently. For example, one study found that Latino parents sometimes used shows such as *Sesame Street* to improve their children's language skills.

On the one hand, media in general, and television in particular, have the ability to enhance cognitive skills, increase knowledge, model social conduct, and promote physical well-being. For example, research examining various educational and “edutainment” software applications reveals that the nature of computing experiences can have an impact on children's learning and sense of self-worth, and that computers can give children opportunities to develop mastery over technology and be more self-directed.<sup>44</sup> In the school environment, shared computers often have been found to facilitate social interaction and cooperation, friendship formation, and constructive group play.<sup>45,46</sup>

On the other hand, media can have negative effects as well. While there is much still to be learned about the relationship between media and child development, a meta-analysis of more than 3,000 studies of television's powerful influence on children concluded that even simply the availability of television was associated with delayed development in a child's verbal skills and in the amount of effort applied to academic tasks.<sup>47</sup> Further-

more, the content of what children watch on television makes a difference. Researchers report that while watching some types of programming can improve cognitive skills and academic performance, watching cartoons and action-oriented programming can lead to more impulsive and less analytic thinking.<sup>48</sup>

Many media images and messages have been linked to negative effects for children related to violence, risky health behaviors, and stereotyping. To the extent that the content represents the dominant cultures' images and values, media is likely to work to strengthen the effects of racism and segregation. Studies examining how the portrayal of minorities on television may affect how others view them are scarce. But in terms of how images of minorities affect minority children themselves, some evidence suggests that seeing members of their group portrayed on television is important to children, and can contribute to their self-esteem even when the portrayal is not all positive.<sup>49</sup> Good or bad, the effects of media are likely to be more pronounced during middle childhood, when children are increasingly their own agents and consumers of media outlets at the same time that they are forging their perceptions of their own competencies.

### **Adaptive Culture: The Risks and Benefits of Growing Up in Diverse Contexts**

Diversity is espoused as an American value, as expressed, for example in the recent Supreme Court decision favoring affirmative action programs by colleges.<sup>50</sup> For children of color and children of immigrant families, however, the experiences of growing up in a cultural context different from the dominant culture can constitute a source of both developmental risks and benefits. To overcome the developmental risks, society would need to ensure that all children have equal access to critical resources that promote their development.

This has not been the case in the United States. Instead of targeting efforts at increasing resources and eradicating racism, society has tended to attribute the develop-

mental risks of children of color and children of immigrant families to behavioral, cognitive, linguistic, and motivational deficits. Such perceived deficits are more appropriately recognized as manifestations of adaptive culture: Families and children of color develop goals, values, attitudes, and behaviors that set them apart from the dominant culture because of social stratification deriving from prejudice, discrimination, racism, or segregation, and the differential access to critical resources.<sup>51</sup> Although adaptive culture may lead to lower scores on standard measures of achievement and well-being for outsider children, it can also be growth-promoting for them, especially through middle childhood.

### **Diversity Conceptualized as Risk**

Cultural differences have become a source of vulnerability in the United States for various reasons, the most significant of which is that historically they have been conceptualized as such.<sup>52</sup> Most social research and policy in this country is based on a set of assumptions that attribute negative developmental outcomes among outsider children to either genetic or cultural factors. While cultural differences can pose developmental risks, such as when there is a cultural mismatch between service providers and clients, policies based on the assumption that cultural differences cause negative outcomes generally fail to recognize the real underlying problems.

Most developmental research, clinical interventions, and social policies have regarded the child-rearing values, attitudes, practices, and norms of the dominant culture (that is, white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class) to be optimal for child development.<sup>53</sup> But using these behaviors as the only normative, universal standard does a disservice both to scientific inquiry and to the interests of children in many ways, for when minority groups are compared to majority groups, they are most typically found wanting.<sup>54</sup> For example, most research on African American and Latino school-aged children focuses on aggression, delinquency, attention deficits, and hyperactivity.<sup>55</sup> This is most commonly referred to as a “lens of deficit.” The classification of cultural differences as “deviance” has not only dominated the majority of child development literature,<sup>56</sup> but also has resulted in the exclusion of studying normative behavior in children of color and of immigrant backgrounds.

Governmental policies and clinical strategies have advanced the idea of cultural differences in child rearing

and developmental outcomes as deficits, which need to be remedied through re-socialization and compensatory programs.<sup>57</sup> These policies and programs typically fail to bring about systemic change in the life conditions and outcomes for these families because they fail to address the underlying causes of lack of resources and racism.

Racism, discrimination, and diminished life opportunities related to segregation constitute the critical, underlying source of risk for children of color and for children of immigrant families.<sup>58</sup> Experiences of exclusion at various societal levels constitute, at a minimum, insults to children’s healthy social and cognitive development.<sup>59</sup> Segregation, in its many forms—including residential, economic, linguistic, social, and psychological—not only places the child at risk, but also contributes to significant mistrust among populations of diverse cultural backgrounds.<sup>60</sup>

Researchers have found that if interventions targeted to children and families from diverse backgrounds are to be truly successful, they must incorporate culturally relevant resources and promote the development of alternative competencies.<sup>61</sup> Differing cultural values and goals, as well as diverse communication and interaction styles all influence the ways in which both development and interventions are understood by parents and professionals alike. When parents’ conceptions of development conflict with those of the intervention system, the cultural mismatch can constitute an additional source of risk, rendering any services less effective.

To address this risk, more culturally relevant interventions need to be adopted. Service providers should work together with clients to mutually identify a problem, examine beliefs about the causes of the problem, and determine the appropriate course of action.<sup>62</sup> Ensuring that the interventions are compatible with parental goals and values, and working with parents to increase their understanding of the intervention approaches of the dominant culture, can transform these differences into assets on behalf of the children.

For example, a Latino parent/community program to assist Mexican American families in addressing school-related issues implemented a parent support group that was effective in two ways.<sup>63</sup> First, the parents learned how to convey their concerns regarding bilingual programs and other curricula to the school officials. Second,



## Box 1

### Mexican-American Parent/Community Organizing

The Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA) is a parent/community organization in Carpinteria, California, that was established by Spanish-speaking immigrant families to unite and support families in addressing school-related issues, and to break the cycle of isolation that Mexican families had experienced.

Mexican workers were valued in the community, but that did not grant their families equal status in the work force, housing, social activities, or the schools. Before the 1970s, institutionalized segregation was active in the schools and students faced constant ridicule because they were Mexican. In the early 1970s, Carpinteria used the federal government funding made available to create a bilingual program for limited English-speaking students. When the federal funding ended, however, so did the bilingual program, and by the mid-1980s, Spanish-speaking students were no longer making the academic gains that had been achieved when the bilingual program was in place. Few resources existed to help Spanish-speaking parents to make the connection with the school, and as children moved up the academic ladder and learned more English, parents were distanced from them and the schooling process.

In the mid-1990s, COPLA was created to help Latino families improve their communication with the schools and with their children in the home. It helped Spanish-speaking families learn how to enhance their children's schooling opportunities in two ways:

- 1) It required the schools to improve their programs for Spanish speakers; and
- 2) It enabled families to learn from each other how to build learning environments in their homes that would correspond to the school's expectations.

Through COPLA, Mexican American parents were able to establish a cooperative dialogue with the schools to encourage them to provide effective bilingual programs for their children. The organization was successful because it allowed families greater opportunity to participate without rejecting their Spanish language or their cultural values, such as respect for elders and concern for collectivity. After more than 10 years, COPLA is still in operation today.

Source: Delgado-Gaitan, C. Socializing young children in Mexican-American families: An intergenerational perspective. In *Cross-cultural roots of minority child development*. P.M. Greenfield and R.R. Cocking, eds. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994, pp. 55–86.

the experience helped them learn how to socialize their children to meet the expectations of the school. (See Box 1.) The parents who participated in the program were more likely to speak with their children in ways that encouraged specific verbal and critical thinking skills, which benefited the children academically.

#### Diversity Conceptualized as an Asset or Protective Factor

Although rarely considered as such, cultural diversity can be conceptualized as a developmental resource—that is, the children's home cultures and exposure to an adaptive culture at the community level can be growth-promoting. Little research has been conducted to learn about family strengths, coping and survival strategies, and successful adaptations among children of color and children of immigrants. Yet parents of all cultural

backgrounds generally act in what they perceive to be the best interests of their children, and most children develop appropriate competencies in most cultural settings.<sup>64</sup> Even if children of color and of immigrant backgrounds are overrepresented in high-risk groups, the majority of these children are not members of such groups, and some even excel.

High family cohesion, strong sense of family obligation,<sup>65</sup> strong ethnic pride, and high value of education are some of the characteristics that have been observed in outsider families that can be positive influences on children's development through middle childhood. For example, a recent study examined the development of academic attitudes and pathways during middle childhood from three immigrant communities. The study found that, as in other research with children of im-

migrants, the children generally demonstrated positive academic pathways; only 28% of the children were doing poorly.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, an increase in positive attitudes toward school was observed over time across all three immigrant groups.<sup>67</sup> The only significant differences between immigrant groups were found among Cambodian boys, who were more likely than Portuguese or Dominican boys to be doing well academically. Perhaps differences in the process of immigration might explain this outcome. Even within recent waves of immigration, the circumstances of departure and arrival, as well as the actual immigration processes themselves, vary from one ethnic/racial group to another, and from one family

to another.<sup>68</sup> Thus, one plausible explanation in this case may be due to a greater sense of family obligation among Cambodian boys, whose families were refugees and survivors of a devastating war. (See Box 2.)

For many ethnic minority and children from immigrant families in the United States, being a member of more than one cultural group is the norm. Although the experience of navigating two cultural and potentially two linguistic systems was once conceptualized as an obstacle to a child's healthy development, the potential benefits of a dual culture upbringing are becoming apparent. Studies are beginning to show that balanced

## Box 2

### Contrasting Environments of Three Immigrant Groups

Descriptions of three immigrant communities included in a study of middle childhood conducted from 1998 to 2000 in the northeast United States illustrate the variation in experiences and environments across different immigrant groups. The groups differ in their ascribed ethnicity (as Latino, white, and Asian), home culture and language, phenotypical features, timing and process of immigration, and compatibility with their receiving communities.

#### The Dominican Community

The Dominican community in the study has grown steadily since the 1960s, with newcomers arriving regularly, joining longer-established Latino communities both locally and nationally. The parents and their children maintain much of their "Spanish" cultural values and identity. They return frequently to the Dominican Republic for visits, and are annexed to an established, large Latino enclave. There are Spanish-language churches, businesses, sports leagues, newspapers, television and radio stations, and community organizations serving Latinos. Latinos represent about 44% of the elementary school students in the local school districts, with Dominicans accounting for the largest share.

#### The Portuguese Community

The Portuguese immigrants and their children in the study represent the tail-end of a long migrant stream beginning more than a century ago. Over time, the local community has become fairly integrated with English speakers and non-Portuguese residents, but Portuguese institutions such as churches and halls still serve as focal points in the community. Compared with the other immigrant groups in the study, Portuguese parents are more likely to be comfortable with their English skills, employed in skilled and professional positions, and to own their own homes. Portuguese Americans are the dominant and almost exclusive ethnic group in the local school system.

#### The Cambodian Community

Unlike the Dominicans and Portuguese, who arrived as voluntary labor migrants, the Cambodians arrived as refugees from camps in Thailand, after having survived the Khmer Rouge genocide. Most arrived during a short period from 1980 to 1986. The local community was a significant resettlement site because of the religious and charitable organizations that sponsored refugees, and because it was deemed a federal resettlement site. The Cambodian families tended to be poorer, and to have significantly more people living in their households, compared with the other immigrant groups. About 10% of the local elementary school population is Asian, with Cambodians accounting for more than half (or just over 5% overall).

Source: García Coll, C., Szalacha, L. middle childhood. In *Developmental pathways through middle childhood: Rethinking contexts and diversity resources*. C.R. Cooper, C.T. García Coll, T. Bartko, H. Davis, and C. Chatman, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, forthcoming.

## Box 3

### Navigating Multiple Worlds

In studies of bilingual students, ages 11-17, in California, researchers found that young people know how to navigate between the overlapping contexts of their lives which they referred to as separate worlds.

Students readily shared—both in words and in pictures—the wide array of worlds in their lives, including their families, their countries of origin, friends' homes, churches, mosques, academic outreach programs, shopping malls, video arcades, school clubs, and sports. They described how some worlds fit together, while others were in conflict or far apart. Different “scripts” related to navigating across these worlds, as students progressed through the academic pipeline from high school to college. Resources were reflected in the brokering conducted by teachers, parents, and program staff when they spoke up for the students and provided emotional support. Students experienced challenges in “gatekeeping” when parents kept them home

from school to protect them from dangers, or when counselors tried to track them into remedial classes.

In addition, bilingual students were confronted with the challenge of learning adaptability and of working both with and against academic gatekeepers. Some students moved smoothly from world to world, and some found it “manageable” or “difficult.” But others found the borders “impenetrable.” They found moving between worlds so difficult that they had become alienated from school, family, or peers.

For bilingual students, the ability to negotiate between worlds affects their chances of effectively using educational institutions and supports to further their education and work experiences, and to enhance their lives as adults. Students stated that outreach programs cultivated a feeling of family while imparting skills, information, high expectations, and a sense of moral purpose to “do something good for your people.”

Sources: Cooper, C. R., Cooper, Jr., math pathways to college. *Applied Developmental Science* (2002) 6(2): 73–87; and Phelan, P., Davidson, A. L., and Yu, H. C. Students' multiple worlds: Navigating the borders of family, peer, and school cultures. In *Cultural diversity: Implications for education*. P. Phelan and A. L. Davidson, eds. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991, pp. 52–88.

bilingualism may promote cognitive growth by contributing to a meta-linguistic awareness and language proficiency in children.<sup>69</sup> Also, bilingual children may have greater adaptability and coping skills, and be more able to relate to and empathize with a variety of individuals from different backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> For example, one study documented the resilience shown by bilingual children as they learned to successfully navigate the multiple worlds they encountered at home, school, and beyond.<sup>71</sup> (See Box 3.)

### Implications for Social Policy and Future Research

The changing demographics of the U.S. population demands a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of the role of race, ethnicity, and culture in permeating

the development of competencies of children during middle childhood. Deficit models of development that attribute failure to succeed to cultural factors do not address the underlying causes of the problem and should be abandoned. Immigrant and other ethnic populations of color lie on a continuum of multiple racialized and ethnic realities in the United States.<sup>72</sup> Studying this continuum can provide insight on how children and families negotiate the experiences of exclusion, segregation, discrimination and racism, and in turn, how these interactions influence the diverse pathways of children's development through middle childhood. To provide a new base on which to build social policies and implement effective prevention and intervention programs, the unique sources of risk and protective factors for these children must be acknowledged and incorporated into strategies to bring them more resources and supports.

As with all children, during middle childhood, children of color and children of immigrant backgrounds start negotiating psychological, social, and academic pathways through mainstream institutions on a daily basis. Whether these pathways are positive or negative can have long-term consequences for their life trajectories. Society should strive to promote positive pathways through middle childhood for all children, regardless of background, by ensuring access to critical resources now and in the future.

Various strategies that recognize both the strengths and challenges of growing up as children of color or as children of immigrant families in the United States might include the following:

- ▶ Policies and programs that move from “one-size-fits-all” to more contextualized approaches that allow families to make more choices about their participation in various aspects of the programs to better fit their needs.<sup>73</sup>
- ▶ Flexibility in funding that could be used to target specific community needs, such as the needs of non-English speaking populations.
- ▶ Multilevel interventions that involve family, neighborhoods, schools, and other institutions working together, instead of single level interventions focused on each environment in isolation.
- ▶ Multipronged interventions that include a variety of approaches, such as parenting, formal education, and/or resource and economic supports.
- ▶ Parenting programs that reflect an understanding of parenting practices in families of color and immigrant families as adaptations, in part, to the adversity created by racism and segregation.
- ▶ Schools and neighborhood facilities that promote children’s developmental competencies during and after school hours, and during school vacations.
- ▶ Culturally specific programs that bridge the cultural gaps between schools and homes to provide more effective educational experiences.
- ▶ More accurate measures of culture, race, and ethnicity, including more precise research of within-group varia-

tion, to increase understanding of the development of children of color and children of immigrant families, and of normative processes in general.<sup>74</sup>

Significant improvement in developmental outcomes for children of color and children of immigrant backgrounds through middle childhood can only be expected if the family and child’s position in the stratification system is altered. Thus, if limited resources are available, investments in parental formal education might be a better use of funds than investments in parenting classes. Not only is a parent’s level of education associated with changes in caretaking practices,<sup>75</sup> more importantly, it is associated with changes in social position and status, which can improve access to critical resources such as better schools, neighborhoods, and preventive medical care.

Ultimately, however, elimination of differences in developmental outcomes associated with differences in social status can only result from a firm commitment to the eradication of racism and its concomitant consequences of prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and segregation. Although family-level and community-specific interventions are a first step, the ultimate goal must be to eradicate differential access to critical resources as a function of residence. Because the history and prevalence of segregation in the United States is pervasive, a more systemic approach may be required: to infuse impoverished areas with enough resources to guarantee that all children, irrespective of their backgrounds, will have access to those resources most critical to their development. During middle childhood, the most critical resources are schools and neighborhood facilities. Schools that serve primarily children of color and children of immigrant families need to be as good as those that serve predominantly white middle-class populations. Similarly, equity in neighborhood facilities must be achieved.

In summary, to foster simultaneous educational and economic development of immigrant families and their children, society must advance beyond the remediation/compensation paradigm of social policies and practices. Interventions with individual children and families, rather than the systems that provide critical resources, are likely to bring only limited impact.<sup>76</sup> Instead, framing parents’ behavior as a mediating mecha-

nism through which ecological forces operate allows social programs and policies to shift dramatically. The focus could turn to promoting access to opportunity structures so that children of color and of immigrant families would be better able to achieve success,<sup>77</sup> and programs would be better able to maintain the gains achieved by their services, whether centered on the children or parents. Also, more multilevel approaches

that measure assets, strengths, and successes within carefully defined populations of children of color and children of immigrant families might help to identify alternative successful pathways as well as outcomes. Above all, rather than continue to create programs and services to cope with poverty, society must redefine its aspirations for these families to move out of poverty altogether.

## ENDNOTES

1. According to Eccles, there are three key forces that combine to influence children's self-confidence and engagement in tasks and activities in middle childhood: "(1) cognitive changes that heighten children's ability to reflect on their own successes and failures; (2) a broadening of children's worlds to encompass peers, adults, and activities outside the family; and (3) exposure to social comparison and competition in school classrooms and peer groups." See Eccles, J.S. The development of children ages 6 to 14. *The Future of Children: When School Is Out* (Fall 1999) 9(2):30–44.
2. Entwistle, D.R., Alexander, K.L., Pallas, A.M., and Cadigan, D. The emergent academic self-image of first graders: Its response to social structures. *Child Development* (1987) 58:1190–1206; and Skaalvic, E.M., and Hagvet, K.A. Academic achievement and self-concept: An analysis of causal predominance in a developmental perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1990) 58(2):292–307.
3. Alexander, K.L., Entwistle, D.R., and Horsey, C.S. From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. *Sociology of Education* (1997) 70(2):87–107; and Dauber, S.L., Alexander, K.L., and Entwistle, D.R. Tracking and transitions through the middle grades: Channeling educational trajectories. *Sociology of Education* (1996) 69(4):290–307.
4. Not all "children of color" are first, second, or even third-generation children of immigrants and, in spite of the proportions of varying ethnic, racial, and cultural groups immigrating to the United States, not all immigrants are "persons of color." Nevertheless, both groups share "outsider status," as exemplified by their skin color, phenotype, or native language, and constitute fundamentally different populations than children in middle-class white communities.
5. Suárez-Orozco, C., and Suárez-Orozco, M.M. *Transformations: Migration, family life, and achievement motivation among Latino adolescents*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995; and Suárez-Orozco, C., and Suárez-Orozco, M.M. *Children of immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
6. Spencer, M.B., and Markstrom-Adams, C. Identity processes among racial and ethnic minority children in America. *Child Development* (1990) 61(2):290–310.
7. Zhou, M. Growing up American: The challenge confronting immigrant children and children of immigrants. *Annual Review of Sociology* (1997) 23:63–95; Wilson, W.J. *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; and Hernandez, D.J. *America's children: Resources from family, government, and the economy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993.
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9. García Coll, C., and Magnuson, K. The psychological experience of immigration: A developmental perspective. In *Immigration and the family: Research and policy on U.S. immigrants*. A. Booth, A. Couter, and N. Landale, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998, pp. 91–131; and Fuligni, A.J. Adolescents from immigrant families. In *Studying minority adolescents: Conceptual, methodological, and theoretical issues*. V.C. McLoyd and L. Steinberg, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998, pp. 127–143.
10. See Bronfenbrenner, U. *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, U. Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology* (1986) 22:723–742; and Goodnow, J. Diversity, contexts, pathways: Understanding each and making connections. In *Hills of gold: Rethinking diversity and contexts as resources for children's developmental pathways*. C.R. Cooper, C. García Coll, T. Bartko, et al., eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, forthcoming. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model emphasized the importance of the interconnection between nested contexts, of how circumstances in one context (such as the immigrant family) can moderate the impact of another context (such as the neighborhood school) on developmental processes. The emphasis moves away from static unidirectional influences to person-process-context interactions over time.
11. This integrative model of development for minority children posits that children's psychosocial characteristics can only be fully understood when viewed as agents within the contexts of historically based social stratification systems and the surrounding micro and macro elements interacting throughout their development. See García Coll, C.T., Lambert, G., Jenkins, R., et al. An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development* (1996) 67:1891–1914.
12. Thompson, J.B. *Studies in the theory of ideology*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1984.
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14. Essed, P. *Understanding everyday racism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991.
15. For example, the children say things such as, "The children make fun of me for being Puerto Rican." Szalacha, L.A., Erkut, S., García Coll, C., et al. Discrimination and Puerto Rican children and adolescents' mental health. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (2003) 9(2):141–155; and Szalacha, L.A., Erkut, S., García Coll, C., et al. Perceived discrimination and resilience. In *Resilience and vulnerability: Adaptation in the context of childhood adversities*. S. Luthar, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 414–435.
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- sions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (1983) 9:551–558; and Pettigrew, T.F. The nature of modern racism in the United States. *Revue Internationale De Psychologie Sociale* (1989) 2:291–303.
17. See note 10, Bronfenbrenner, 1979; and Bronfenbrenner, 1986.
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  20. See note 5, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001; and note 6, Spencer and Markstrom-Adams.
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  36. Though research shows positive changes in adjustment related to participation in structured leisure activities for middle-class youth, such participation has also been found to be negatively associated with GPA for low-income youth. For example, in one study, African American children received lower academic grades during fifth grade when they spent more cumulative after-school time playing coached sports and less time socializing (but they were also rated as being better adjusted emotionally). See McHale, S.M., Crouter, A.C., and Tucker, C.J. Free-time activities in middle childhood: Links with adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development* (2001) 72:1764–1778; and Posner, J., and Vandell, D. After-school activities and the development of low-income urban children: A longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology* (1999) 35(3):868–879.
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  39. The researchers measured neighborhood collective efficacy (that is, social cohesion among neighbors combined with a willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good and not strict measures of socioeconomic status) and found it to be positively associated with between-neighborhood reliability ( $p < .001$ ) and negatively correlated with levels of violence ( $p < .001$ ). Collective efficacy significantly ( $p < .001$ ) and positively related to friendship and kinship ties ( $r = .49$ ), organizational participation ( $r = .45$ ), and neighborhood services ( $r = .21$ ), whereas residential stability was negatively

- associated with levels of violence ( $t = 6.95$ ). See Sampson, R.J., Raudenbush, S.W., and Earls, F. Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science* (1997) 277:918–924.
40. See note 38, Rodriguez; and note 38, Tatum.
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  49. See note 43, Huston and Wright, p. 1037.
  50. Grutter v. Bollinger, 123 S. Ct. 2325 (2003).
  51. See note 11, García Coll, et al.
  52. See note 19, García Coll and Magnuson.
  53. García Coll, C.T., and Meyer, E. The socio-cultural context of infant development. In *Handbook of infant mental health*. C.H. Zeanah, ed. New York: Guilford Press, 1993, pp 56–69.
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  57. See note 54, Bronfenbrenner. See also note 19, García Coll and Magnuson; and note 9, García Coll and Magnuson.
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  61. See note 11, García Coll, et al.
  62. Groce, N.E., and Zola, I.K. Multiculturalism, chronic illness, and disability. *Pediatrics* (May 1993) 91:1048–1055.
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  64. See note 19, García Coll and Magnuson.
  65. For further discussion of the strong sense of family obligation among some minority and immigrant groups, see the article by Fuligni and Hardway in this journal issue.
  66. García Coll, C., Szalacha, L., and Palacios, N. Children of Dominican, Portuguese, and Cambodian immigrant families: Academic attitudes and pathways during middle childhood. In *Developmental pathways through middle childhood: Rethinking contexts and diversity as resources*. C.R. Cooper, C.T. García Coll, T. Bartko, et al., eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, forthcoming. The study was a two-cohort, short-term longitudinal study of over 300 families with children in either the first or fourth grade at the time of recruitment.
  67. This is the opposite of what has been previously encountered in other samples of minority children. See Blumenfeld, P.C., Secada, W., and Modell, J. School engagement of inner city students during middle childhood. In *Developmental pathways through middle childhood: Rethinking contexts and diversity as resources*. C.R. Cooper, C.T. García Coll, T. Bartko, et al., eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, forthcoming.
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  71. See note 60, Cooper, et al.; and Cooper, C.R., Jackson, J.F., Azmitia, M., et al. Bridging students' multiple worlds: African American and Latino youth in academic outreach programs. In *Changing schools for changing students: An anthology of research on language minorities*. R.F. Macias, and R.G. Garcia Ramos, eds. Santa Barbara: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute, 1995, pp. 245–267.
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  73. For example, programs such as the New Hope intervention provide families with a series of options from which they can choose what best fits their daily routines and needs. Researchers have found that families differ widely in which aspects of the program they choose to participate in. See Huston, A., Miller, C., Richburg-Hayes, L., et al. *Five-year results of a program to reduce poverty and reform welfare*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2003; and Huston, A., Duncan, G., Granger, R., et al. Work-based anti-poverty programs for parents can enhance the school performance and social behavior of children. *Child Development* (2001) 72(1):318–336.
  74. For example, the documentation of the development of multiple, overlapping (and sometimes even contradictory) ethnic identities during middle childhood can contribute to the understanding of social identities in general, and augment developmental theories regarding identity, which presently begin with adolescence. See Ruble, D.N.,

- Alvarez, J., Bachman, M., et al. The development of a sense of “we”: The emergence and implications of children’s collective identity. In *The development of the social self*. M. Bennett and F. Sani, eds. New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2004.
75. In Latino populations, higher levels of maternal education and socioeconomic status are related to parenting practices and conceptualizations that are closer to Anglo standards than to traditional Latino practices. See Gutierrez, J., and Sameroff, A. Determinants of complexity in Mexican-American mothers’ conceptions of child development. *Child Development* (1990) 61:384–394; and Laosa, L.M. Maternal teaching strategies in Chicano and Anglo-American families: The influence of culture and education on maternal behavior. *Child Development* (1984) 51:759–765.
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77. Opportunity structures refer to the distribution of opportunities to achieve goals in a social system. Thus, there are economic opportunity structures (such as access to employment, sufficient wages, and publicly funded workforce systems); educational opportunity structures (such as access to good schools and scholarship programs); and political opportunity structures (such as the formation of social and political alliances and representative elections).