Book Review


Now is a time of abundant growth and expansive migration among Latino ethnic groups across the United States. Representing over 11 percent of the U.S. population and numbering over thirty million, Latinos, including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, and others, are the fastest growing ethnic groups. Mental health and human services practitioners all over the country are in need of guidance toward intervention that is effective and lasting for Latinos. In this book, Joan Koss-Chioino and Luis Vargas offer such a guide for responding to the most vulnerable group, Latino youth.

As long-standing scholars and researchers with Latino families, women, and children, Koss-Chioino, a professor of anthropology, and Vargas, a clinical psychologist, write with authentic familiarity of cultural values and the meanings of day-to-day activities that they present as the woof, the basic weaving threads, of Latino life fabric. As well, their knowledge of literature and research with Latino populations is evident in every aspect of the book.

The authors describe their premise for this work as the need to develop practice models that focus on the individual-in-context, incorporating culture and adolescent development. The book presents such an approach to intervening with Latino youths in the contexts of their environment. The approach is rooted in ecosystems and developmental theories and in the expanded developmental ecology model of social scientist Urie Bronfenbrenner. The Bronfenbrenner model proposes that context in this sense, is composed of four interrelated levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. It also includes the biological domain, the concept of proximal processes such as child-parent or child-child interactions, and the effect of historical time or period on the individual environment. Ultimately, it incorporates the themes of life span and developmental timing, immediate and remote environments, and historical events as a formulation of interwoven context.

While various therapy models, including narrative therapy and family systems therapy, may be used with the contextual approach,
Koss-Chioino and Vargas emphasize that culture must be seen as the symbolic system that underlies behavior when intervening in a youth's environment. Essential to the approach is understanding the adolescent’s search for meaning within his local worlds, his own context. It is important that the practitioner take into account his/her own worlds and how those contexts affect his/her relationship with the youth, including goals for treatment and the practitioner’s expectations for outcome.

The book offers useful direction for developing assessment and subsequently choosing interventions within a contextual framework. Using the contextual approach, the practitioner engages in an ethnographic or qualitative method of investigation and intervenes at multiple levels of context. Culture remains central in the practitioner's effort to grasp the immediate meanings and perceptions of everyone involved—family, peers, neighborhood, school, spiritual community. His/her role becomes that of inquirer, collaborator, and negotiator in creating a mutual and safe environment for intervention, requiring different skills and attitudes about the practitioner role. A “not knowing” practitioner stance is seen here as more valuable than the traditional stance of “expert.” The priority is on understanding the intricacies of the youth in activity settings in multiple contexts. Using case examples that richly exemplify common issues with Latino youth, the book walks the reader through the process of gathering knowledge and developing an understanding of multiple contexts. This process they identify as profiling the youth in each context, resulting in a lifescape, a detailed comprehensive description. Using lifescape knowledge, intervention is then focused on where there is a poorness of fit between the youth and her environment. Assessment and intervention, as in other constructivist and systemic approaches, are seen as intertwined and continuing simultaneously.

One of the book's most valuable aspects throughout is its informed discussion of important concerns for Latino groups and their impact on Latino youth. It sheds valuable insight, for example, on parental expectations and the meaning of adolescent affiliations and rituals of passage within ethnic groups of the Latino population. Themes such as the deeper significance of language content and process, acculturation issues for the family, the prevalence and consequences of poverty, and the risk to Latinos of laws and mental health practices that are based on White Euro-American culture bring fresh and fundamental awareness for practitioners.

Social workers will find familiarity in the ecosystems template of