

# Migration as a Context-Dependent Dynamic in a World of Global Inequalities\*

## Las Migraciones como Dinámica Dependiente del Contexto en un Mundo de Desigualdades Globales

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**Abstract.** Global migration is a topic of utmost importance in psychological research. As over 200 million people are on the move across national borders, and many more within their own countries, the processes of these migrations must be examined from different points of view and from different geographical locations. The articles in this special journal issue pointedly illustrate the role of international, national, community, and individual factors that shape these migrations. One cross-cutting theme is the importance of studying how multiple levels of context affect immigrant and migrant experiences. All six contributions, collectively, enrich the often individual-centric psychological literature. Issues of resilience and spaces of resistance emerged as a second cross-cutting theme, pointing to new directions for acculturation research and intervention. The challenge of recognizing diversity within migrant communities and among migration patterns is a third cross-cutting theme essential to address as we work toward a more equal world in which people can more freely choose whether to stay or leave their homes.

*Keywords:* acculturation, adaptation, diversity, global inequality, immigration, integration, intersectionality, migration, resilience, resistance.

**Resumen.** Las migraciones globales representan un tema de suma importancia en la investigación psicológica. Más de 200 millones de personas se desplazan a través de las naciones del mundo y muchos más son los que lo hacen dentro de las fronteras de su propio país. Estas migraciones deben ser examinadas desde diferentes puntos de vista, perspectivas y lugares geográficos. Los artículos de este monográfico ilustran el papel de los factores organizacionales internacionales, nacionales, comunitarios e individuales que dan forma a estas migraciones. Un primer tema transversal es la importancia que se otorga a estudiar las experiencias migratorias desde una óptica multinivel y nos permiten reflexionar sobre cómo múltiples escenarios y contextos, afectan y definen las experiencias de las personas inmigrantes. Tomados como un conjunto, los seis artículos enriquecen una literatura científica excesivamente enfocada en aspectos psicológicos desde una óptica individualista. Un segundo tema transversal lo constituye aspectos relacionados con la resiliencia y espacios de resistencia. Este tema apunta nuevas direcciones para la investigación y la intervención en aculturación. El desafío de reconocer la diversidad dentro de las comunidades migrantes y los patrones migratorios constituyen un tercer elemento transversal que puede ayudar a la comunidad científica a avanzar hacia un mundo más equitativo en el que todas las personas puedan elegir libremente si quedarse o salir de sus casas.

*Palabras clave:* aculturación, adaptación, diversidad, desigualdad global, inmigración, integración, intersectorialidad, migración, resiliencia, resistencia.

The unequal distribution of resources in the world (among countries and regions), within countries (e.g., rural vs. urban), locally (community by community; within a community) drives people to migrate to new locations that are perceived by them as providing better resources, whether material, spiritual, medical, or educational. These migrations are facilitated by many actors

and factors operating in the countries of origin, the countries of transport, and the destination countries. The migration experiences are affected by national and local governments and their policies, organizations, institutions and other organized groups, as well as by individuals. Migrants both utilize and are controlled by these forces, the interplay of which lead to different spaces of resistance, processes of adaptation, and varied levels of resilience (Sládková, 2010). The collection of the articles in this special journal issue illustrates these important phenomena with “cases” from around the world.

Collectively, the papers here provide a view of the migration experience from multiple angles. Reading

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the full set is like looking through the various windows of a home in order to get a sense of what lies inside – each different vantage point providing information that complements the others. The papers cover many regions of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the Pacific Rim; some focus in on a single country and others focus on a region. The cases include sub-Saharan African doctors who migrate to the United States and Europe for better compensation, ultimately leaving their own countries without needed medical services; Chinese migrants from rural to urban areas who utilize their social networks to increase their life satisfaction; New Zealand young Muslim immigrants who attempt to negotiate their identities by finding balance between their new culture and their native or parents' culture; and migrant adolescents in Italy whose depressive symptoms associated with perceived discrimination are most meliorated by their teachers. The papers also explore public opinion in Moldova, a country where many people who seek better lives are taken advantage of by human traffickers and smugglers, and a theoretical piece which illustrates how local immigrant organizations can be both catalysts for social change and perpetrators of the status quo.

Three fascinating issues run through the six papers. The first is the way in which all the papers probe the social, organizational, cultural, national, international and political contexts that shape migrants' experiences. Second, the papers illustrate varied perspectives on resilience, with some papers more strengths-based and others focused on exploring the detrimental impacts of the migration experience. The third thread revolves around the issues of intersectionality and the exploration of diversity within groups.

### Embedded Contexts

One striking thread that runs through the papers is the adoption of multi-leveled perspectives that take care to avoid locating factors that influence migrants' adaptation entirely within the individual migrant. Since much of psychological migration research focuses on the individual (i.e., Deaux, 2009; Tseng & Yoshikawa, 2008), this journal issue contributes to the current psychological migration debate as it brings attention to specific qualities of a range of embedded contexts while not ignoring individual agency.

A particular strength of this collection is that the articles probe the experiences of migrants in varied regions throughout the world. And in so doing, the body of work highlights the ways in which *national context* affects the impetus for migration as well as the dynamics within the receiving country for migrants. For example, in their work with Muslim youth, Stuart and Ward mention the unique history of New Zealand vis-à-vis immigrants. New Zealand is unique in being

considered bicultural, and the relationship between the indigenous Maori and the colonial base is actively supported by national policies. The almost 90% public endorsement of the value of a multicultural ideology is certainly not replicable in many other countries, and thus Stuart and Ward's results need to be considered in light of the unique national context. Nonetheless, their analysis suggests lessons for other countries that are currently less receptive, i.e., that it is very possible for young migrants to positively integrate into a new society when their new environment is supportive of them.

Xu and Palmer place their analysis of migrants' social networks in the context of China's transformation from a state-planned to a market-oriented economy and in the context of surplus agricultural labor paired with a shortage of workers in the city-based manufacturing sector. They demonstrate the value of adopting a multi-leveled perspective as they place the analysis of migrants' current support networks against the economic backdrop of what forces drew them to the city, illustrating how the economically-driven shift has direct implications for how people define and access their communities of support. In China, even internal migrants need to receive permission from the government to move to cities, and when there, they continue to carry a label of outsiders or "migrants with temporary residence permits." Thus for these migrants, interventions might wisely consider support from the community of origin even after individuals have moved away.

In two other papers, parallel issues are raised about the importance of *international economic and political contexts* in understanding the experiences of migration. Robinson points out that human trafficking tends to occur between poor and politically unstable source countries and wealthier receiving countries. The author identifies macro-level causes of trafficking and organizes them into "push and pull" factors that include immigration policy. International disparities, poverty, unemployment, demand for cheap labor and sex work, corruption and patriarchy are all factors that facilitate human trafficking. Robinson also identifies public sentiment about trafficking as a critical contextual factor that has the potential to facilitate efforts to combat the problem and help its victims. Interestingly, when addressing a very different population, Siankam found some similar factors at play, i.e., medical migration tends to occur when there are disparities between countries with respect to medical salaries, medical resources available to support quality practice, and the effective functioning of hospitals. In both cases, political instability and concerns about trustworthy government functioning combine with increased globalization to shape the migration patterns.

Several of the papers address the qualities of the *interpersonal social context* that influence migrants' lives – from peers, to family, to broader social support networks. For example, Stuart and Ward emphasize

that Muslim migrant youth in New Zealand are embedded in a variety of social groups that affect their strategies for balancing multiple identities, noting the potential for differing pulls from family and peers. In their study of the detrimental effects of perceived discrimination on Northern Italy migrant youth's psychological well-being, Cristini, Scacchi, Perkins, Santinello and Vieno analyze protective factors for depression and find that school environment, especially support from teachers, plays a critical role. The adolescents who self-report more teacher support are significantly less depressed. Considering that migration can disrupt other social supports, such as family and friends, this finding has implications for schools and the important roles that teachers can play in migrant youths' lives. Interestingly, even though not significant in the regression analysis, classmate support and support for multiculturalism are both significantly correlated with teacher support and both negatively correlated with depression – pointing not only to important social supports, but also to the qualities of the school as an organizational setting. These findings fit with research results in the United States, where, for example, Olsen (1998) and Zhou (1997) suggest that schools and teachers can have a negative impact on migrant children's integration when their needs are not specifically addressed and support for multiculturalism is absent. Moreover, in his literature review on immigrant children and the role of schools in their adjustment, Aronowitz (1984) found that "the school was the most appropriate and effective social agency for the delivery of primary and secondary preventive services to immigrant children" (p. 251). Gonzales (2011) states that it is in schools that children form perceptions of their place in the "social reality and cultural imagination of their new nation" (p. 604). Public schools can be powerful catalysts for promoting the acculturation process of the children of immigrants as they foster common experiences and the development of a "community of purpose and action with primary social contacts" (Rumbaut 1997, p. 944).

Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo devote their paper to an in-depth analysis of the role of *organizational contexts* in supporting migrants in their new lives. They point out that community-based organizations have the potential to reinforce and/or transform the standing of migrants in the community. A particularly important dynamic that the authors explore is one wherein organizations devoted to migrants can, while having well-meaning missions, end up perpetuating the status quo that keeps migrants toward the bottom of the social hierarchy. The critical issue they raise is rooted in the asymmetrical power relations within the community and society. They argue that even when there is support for creating organizations devoted to migrants, these groups rarely have real decision-making power within the community, nor do members of migrant organizations tend to have access to the same

resources as others. Additionally, organizations that are dedicated to helping *individual* migrants succeed are not always attuned to empowering the migrant *community* as a whole. Sometimes inter-organizational or community practices may look validating as when migrant groups are invited to represent a valued point of view, yet this arrangement alone does little to shift the actual influence or legitimacy of migrants in the community unless they also have the resources and/or the power to affect change. The authors also make a significant contribution to the understanding of how social context affects immigrants' lives by outlining the qualities of organizational settings that have the transformative potential to function as catalysts for social change and to promote a shift in the force relations between immigrants and other members of the community. These "liberation promoting organizations" serve as a collective political power where members are active participants and help create conditions necessary for social change that can promote healthy integration of migrants. Their work parallels work on the transformative potential of schools, which can be(come) radical spaces for promoting inclusive communities and whole societies if curricula fully integrate migrants' diverse experiences, and become an integral part of learning and the learning environment rather than an add-on, one day or week of celebration of "the other."

### Resilience and Resistance

Many migrants come to their new communities after experiencing trauma, severe poverty, war, and even torture. They have been uprooted, and their established support systems have been disrupted. They often face resistance from members of host communities who may fear that their way of life is threatened by the newcomers (Sonn & Fisher, 2005). In psychological research on migration and resilience, a strong focus has been on understanding acculturation (i.e., Berry, 1997; Navas, Rojas, Garcia, & Pumares, 2007; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010), but there is a tendency to present ethnic and racial groups as passive victims of broader social forces, as "lacking competence – a simple case of blaming victims for their circumstances" (Sonn & Fisher, 2005, p. 353). Most of the articles in this current journal issue recognize migrants' agency in the adaptation process as well as highlight other powerful forces. Several of the studies also illustrate the critical implications that the histories of migrant groups have for understanding the process of integration. At the same time, in the midst of the current exclusionary anti-immigrant discourse in the United States and Europe, it is imperative that research examines the dominant and host communities' stance towards migrants (Dinh & Bond, 2008). Whether the allocation of resources is slanted towards vs. against building

resilience has major implications for individual and community well-being.

Since migration often involves stress and some degree of adversity, the concept of resilience is useful in the study of migration experiences. While some medical and psychological research still conceptualizes resilience as a trait that lies within the individual and often focuses on the negative value of the trait (i.e., Christopher & Kulig, 2000), community psychologists view resilience as resulting from the dynamic interaction among interconnected systems and cumulative protective factors (Leadbeater, Dodgen, & Solarz, 2005). Contexts that support adaptive strategies or promote resistance to oppression (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003) are alluded to across the articles: school, peers, family, general public, and organizations.

Stuart and Ward adopt the framework of positive psychology where they illuminate resilience and strengths of Muslim youth in New Zealand. Young Muslims in this study try to achieve success by managing the expectations others have for them and those they have for themselves. They seem to accept that there are different areas of their lives, which call for different ways of being and then try to reach balance among them. Thus, they are active players and demonstrate resilience in the “dynamic process through which one could minimize risks of negotiating their multiple social worlds and meet the variety of expectations that were placed on them.” Somewhat in contrast to Stuart and Ward, Cristini et al. focus their study in Northern Italy on the negative effects of experiences on young migrants, i.e., impact of discrimination on depression. It would be interesting to place the study of negative outcomes in the context of Italy’s overall approach to migration, where support for multiculturalism is missing from official policy. Interestingly, even with a deficit-oriented outcome measure, the authors are able to document the role of schools and teachers in promoting resilience and healthy acculturation.

Robinson’s analysis of institutional and public perceptions of trafficking in Moldova highlights how public sentiment can be a positive resource for resistance to a tragic social epidemic. Public opinion can propel policy efforts that have the potential to transform the lives of individuals and communities. Xu and Palmer’s study of the social networks that migrants utilize to support resilience in their new urban communities reveals that some Chinese migrant sub-groups may remain marginalized in a highly hierarchical system that excludes migrants from positions of decision-making and power. Considering Xu and Palmer’s work in the context of the special journal issue raises the question of how might their social networks become communities of resistance eventually leading towards transformation of Chinese society.

Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo offer the most explicit model of resilience and resistance to oppres-

sion not only for migrants but for society as a whole. Migrant organizations have the potential to work across different societal levels and, as Perkins, Palmer and Ramirez mention in their introduction, to “transform oppressive situations toward goals of well-being at all levels of society.”

### Diversity Within

As our understanding of diverse cultures and racial/cultural identities has evolved over the last several decades, the issue of diversity *within* various groups has received more attention (Ishii-Kuntz, 2000; Lewis-Fernández et al., 2007). The tendency to make generalizations about a cultural/ethnic group is a common concern about research on migrant communities (Sonn & Fisher, 2005). Research that ignores the wide variations in cultures and nationalities within Latino and Asian communities has been most pointedly critiqued (e.g., Hune, 2002; Pang, 1990; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002). Several of the papers in this journal issue illustrate the importance of looking at diversity within groups quite thoughtfully. However, the coverage of issues of intersectionality, i.e., attention to how multiple identities combine and interact to affect experience, is uneven across the papers. This is particularly true for the coverage of gender-related dynamics.

Xu and Palmer acknowledge both commonalities and the variations among adaptive strategies within their study. While acknowledging that most Chinese migrants rely heavily on their social networks, they challenge the assumption that all migrant communities live in harmony and promote solidarity among their members. While the authors did find some such solidarity, they also found several sub-variations among China’s internal migrants, which suggests it is not useful to speak of a single migrant community in China’s cities but rather to acknowledge the different groups and their varied needs. The sub-groups (i.e. older immigrants, wives, new generation) use and produce social networks in their new locations that differ in gender, age, and education but overall remain at the bottom of Chinese society and mostly associate with people lacking power. Xu and Palmer acknowledge the fact that women and men “occupy different social spheres” and explore the implications of their access to different resources.

Robinson’s study queried perceptions of trafficking of men and children in addition to women, yet she found that many respondents identified human trafficking as the trafficking of *women* for sex and domestic work. She found that many interviewees labeled patriarchal views as one of the primary factors that facilitate or drive the problem, and she explored ways that gendered influences can shape public attitudes about the phenomenon. Robinson also explicates the ways that being female makes victims especially vul-

nerable – both to being lured into being trafficked and to being trapped in the receiving country, particularly when they arrive in countries with strict gender expectations and limitations on women’s mobility. It would be interesting to look at whether sex of the interviewees was related to different types of perceptions and whether any variations might have implications for differentiated public awareness campaigns.

Unfortunately, some of the other papers did not discuss the issues of sex, gender expectations, and gender-defined contexts in much depth. There are missed opportunities for furthering our understanding of how the interactions among various identities affect migrants’ experiences. For example, Cristini et al., found that gender is a significant predictor of discrimination among the migrants they surveyed. Rather than consider the different experiences of the boys and the girls, however, the researchers controlled for gender (see Messing et al., 2003, for a critique of such approaches). The gender difference is a finding that begs for additional exploration. The sample in this study was largely male and the settings were male-dominated schools that prepare students for jobs in manual, trade or technical fields. The fact that the girls are in the minority in their schools and preparing to enter male-dominated careers undoubtedly has an impact on their adaptation experiences, and those experiences are likely to be quite different from those of their male peers. So a question that runs parallel to the authors’ exploration of the schools’ endorsement of values around multiculturalism is what is the school climate vis-à-vis support for girls and women in non-traditional schools and careers? Here, gender is likely to interact with ethnic identity, social supports, and school climate to shape immigration experiences, and it is worth additional serious attention.

It is also surprising that Paloma’s and Manzano-Arrondo’s paper rooted in liberation psychology and devoted to an exploration of how the dynamics of privilege affect the role of immigrant organizations in the community makes little mention of gender dynamics. A few of many questions worthy of follow up include: how does the sex of an organizational leader affect the efficacy of the organization? What influence does the gender make up of the constituency served affect the role of the organization in the community? Does the gender of societal leaders influence tendencies toward or against more inclusive policy and social justice?

While it is clear that Siankam’s sample of 24 Sub-Saharan doctors includes both men and women, the exact sex distribution of the sample does not appear to be reported. Exploration of the intersections of participants’ varied identities (e.g., national and cultural with sex and gender) could prove informative. As the author notes, the practice of medicine is “an exercise in power” with its own internal hierarchies among generalists and specialists. Some of those power hierarchies parallel the areas of medicine that are more accepting

of and accessible to women. In addition, as with many other migration dynamics, it would be useful to contrast the gendered aspects of the home country’s traditions with those of the receiving context to more fully understand the ways in which these migration experiences vary for women and men.

Stuart and Ward worked with both female and male young Muslims in New Zealand. In their methods section they explain that “while the workshops were gender mixed, for the comfort of the participants, males and females had separate designated areas in the workshop rooms.” Nevertheless, in their analyses and results, they missed the opportunity to explore gender dynamics in any depth. These issues would seem to be of central importance given that females and males have strongly differentiated roles in many Muslim cultures, which likely contrast with New Zealand’s dominant cultural views of gender roles. Moreover, the authors mention the sex of the interviewers and the researchers, but their inquiry into this issue could have gone into considerably more depth. Additional analyses of the gendered nature of the experiences of Muslim youth in New Zealand would add much value to this rich study.

Overall, as community psychologists we need to push toward consistent consideration of intersectionality and diversity within groups, that are often assumed by outsiders to be homogeneous. Highlighted here the ways that sex and gender are important aspects of the social ecological context that need to be more actively considered, but other dimensions of social identities are equally important. Further inquiry into the interactions among varied identities would do much to enrich our understanding of migrant experiences, which, in turn, could lead to more meaningful and nuanced interventions.

## In Sum

Taken together, the articles in this special journal issue on “Migration and Community” provide an extraordinary mosaic of migration research from around the world. The articles all provide important insights about the challenges migrants face. In this commentary, we emphasize the contributions the authors make to our understanding of the contexts that influence the experiences of migrants and to our understanding of conditions that support resilience. We also challenge researchers to more consistently probe the ways in which gender interacts with other identities to shape these experiences. The collection highlights the need for more ecologically driven, multi-level, strengths-based migration research, which can provide unique insights about the creation of contexts receptive to and supportive of migrants. Community psychology can lead the way in research that seeks to understand individual (im)migrants - with all their intersecting

identities - as embedded in contexts from the local to the global. Ultimately, we need to transform the world into a place where resources are more equally distributed and where there is less press to relocate and/or to reject newcomers.

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