

## **Ecological Development and Personal Change**

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As a fraternity/sorority professional it is important to learn how to reflect upon, analyze and create personal development opportunities. The environment affects each individual's social identities and behaviors. Previous change and experience helps to identify social identities and how family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and fraternity brothers or sorority sisters influence the environment, the negotiation of social identities, and behaviors. This article provides ideas about the nature of development within social identities. As you read, we, Cristobal and Aja, encourage you to relate your experiences as a fraternity/sorority professional to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecology of Human Development Model.

People are responsible for their own actions but not necessarily for all of their behaviors. People have the ability to think and reflect, take control and manage actions. However, behaviors are the result of one's relationship with the environment; it occurs more naturally without a conscious "thinking" process. In the process of understanding oneself through the ecology model, individuals should be aware of the relationship with the environment and how the behaviors of others could affect it, positively and/or negatively.

Renn and Arnold (2003) provide a model for understanding our ecological development. There are four major exchanges which create the interactions between the environment and the individual: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. The campus, classmates, job, and fraternity brothers or sorority sisters form microsystems. These are confronting or comforting settings; people interact with them on a one-on-one basis. Mesosystems are the interactions with microsystems; people and activities from individual microsystems interact to form new experiences. A mesosystem can include long-term or recurrent events with our school, job, family, and friend groups. Exosystems are those factors that affect at a larger scale; for example, parents' workplace, the government, and policy makers represent exosystems. Lastly, a macrosystem is the most abstract and complex of Bronfenbrenner's (1997) four systems. It is the factors that impact an individual's development at a more extended approach, including one's culture, religion, gender, political ideology, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, and other subcultures.

As we, Cristobal and Aja, reflect on our own positive and negative experiences at Iowa State University and in the surrounding community, we realize we have been marginalized often throughout our lives, but we have also become conscious of some privileges we have which affect our daily decisions. We have been oppressed and marginalized for reasons such as our skin color, being a female (Aja), our racial backgrounds and other social identities. At the same time, we have enjoyed the privileges associated with being doctoral students, being a male (Cristobal), and coming from medium-working class families. The Iowa State University campus, our cohort, our graduate assistantships, our fraternity brothers or sorority sisters, our families, our friends, our cultures, our religions, and our education influence our ethnic identities and have created development and personal growth. Iowa State University is a predominantly white institution (PWI). Being at a PWI, an individual of color must learn how to navigate around whiteness in order to find "microsystems" to create a level of comfort or an environment that is welcoming, which is important to personal growth. We have learned how to interact and present ourselves professionally in a white and homophobic community, including our interactions with fraternity brothers and sorority sisters. We are aware of the implications and assumptions our skin color creates in other individuals. For example, when we walk into a formal or informal setting, individuals assume we are uneducated because of our skin color. This perception changes as people get to know us; our personalities, research interests, and leadership experiences help to challenge the aforementioned perception.

Mesosystems occur when microsystems interact with each other. Our mesosystems are our graduate assistantships (work place and students), families, and friend groups. The biggest challenges we have faced during our time at Iowa State University have been the balance between our academic work, assistantships, and personal lives. Through this experience we have learned it is not about balance; it is more about a "shifting process" and change. We have learned to prioritize things that are urgent and shift the items that can wait. This "shifting process" can be challenging at times when we have not seen our families, have not participated in a fraternity or sorority program, or have not taken time for ourselves. We learn when and what to "shift" so we can have some sense of balance.

Exosystems are those factors, which affect us at a bigger scale, for example our parents' workplaces, the government, and policy makers. Just recently, the United States government shutdown affected us all at different levels. Examples of those affected include those in the research sector with the shutdown of laboratories, the stop payment for those on food assistance, and those waiting on home loans to be processed. Although we knew the shutdown was only temporary, it did put unneeded stress on our lives. New laws and policies, government reform, environmental regulation, social events, business and industries are examples of exosystems. Exosystems have indirect effects distributed from the top down through other people around us. Also within the exosystems, many times situations are out of our locus of control; the government shutdown was directed by only a few at the top but affected many.

Macrosystems are those factors that impact our development at a more extended approach with particular reference to the belief system, lifestyles and options, and patterns of social interchange. We, Cristobal and Aja, grew up in a home with a form of educational-belief. This influenced our values and beliefs on education. Educators with different teaching training and styles influenced our learning. Knowing that educators also have their life stories that bleed into their teaching which also leads to influence their students. This influences our knowledge, educational beliefs, and values. There are many factors that influence our macrosystems: culture, religions, government, and socioeconomic status that are significant during our development and affect our values and beliefs. Macrosystems influence our experiences and how we interpret those and future experiences.

Every second, minute, hour, and day counts towards our ecological development. As we are changing, society and the environment are changing too. The ecological process can relate to a timeline or a time chain; change happens after change. Many times we have heard, "change is the only constant." Sometimes change is hard for people to handle and to process. Change presents an unwarranted challenge and at times people are afraid of change. As fraternity/sorority professionals, how do we assist our students in navigating change? How do we help our senior students transition from being the student leader known across campus to being in a sea among many other former student leaders? How do we challenge and support all students to take on those leadership roles? How do we push students to think outside the box and work with different fraternity and/or sorority chapters?

One thing to remember is identity development; as students are evolving and changing into these complex systems, professionals need to meet students where they are developmentally. Fraternity/sorority professionals must remember that everyone is being watched, and students are taking notes when it comes to navigating change. We view this article as an opportunity to practice cultivating critical reflection on change as it relates to ecological development. We call for a critical and open dialogue of change as it exists today

within the collegiate fraternity/sorority system and for critical reflection on students' understanding of change as it relates to their ecological development, power, privilege and oppression, and intersecting identities within fraternities and sororities.

### **References**

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