

# Psychosocial Studies of Migration and Community: Introduction to the Special Issue\*

## Estudios Psicosociales sobre Migraciones y Comunidad: Introducción al Monográfico

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**Abstract.** Introducing the special issue on psychosocial studies of migration and community, we briefly reflect on the global increase in, and issues related to, both international and domestic migration, particularly from rural areas of less developed countries, which has fueled rapid urbanization and intercultural tensions in both post-industrial and developing countries. Topics covered in the issue are summarized, including an Italian study of the emotional impact of discrimination against immigrant adolescents; acculturation, integration and adaptation of Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand; perceptions of human trafficking in Moldova; Chinese migrant workers' social networks, life satisfaction and political participation; physician brain drain from sub-Saharan Africa; and a critical analysis of the oppressive and liberating impact of organizations on immigrants, multiculturalism, and social justice. The issue concludes with commentary articles by four leading international scholars of migration and community. The breadth of topics helps to address wide-ranging gaps in the literature, but more psychological and social research must connect ecologically across multiple levels and to cultural, political, economic, and environmental studies of migration and community.

**Keywords:** acculturation, globalization, community, immigration, immigrants, international cultural conflicts, migrants, psychosocial factors.

**Resumen.** Para presentar este monográfico sobre estudios psicosociales de las migraciones y comunidad, hacemos una breve reflexión sobre cómo la era global ha supuesto un aumento de las migraciones y un cambio en los procesos asociados. Se resalta su carácter internacional y nacional—especialmente en las zonas rurales en los países menos desarrollados. Estas migraciones han impulsado una rápida urbanización y han sido el origen de múltiples tensiones interculturales tanto en países post-industrializados como en los que están en vías de desarrollo. El monográfico incluye un estudio sobre el impacto emocional de la discriminación contra los adolescentes inmigrantes en Italia; otro sobre la aculturación, integración y adaptación de los jóvenes musulmanes inmigrantes en Nueva Zelanda; un análisis de las percepciones sobre la trata de seres humanos en Moldavia; otro que aborda las redes sociales, satisfacción con la vida y participación política de los inmigrantes chinos trabajadores, incluye un estudio sobre la fuga de cerebros de los médicos del África subsahariana; y un análisis crítico de los efectos opresores y liberadores de las organizaciones de inmigrantes en las comunidades de asentamiento. El monográfico concluye con los comentarios de cuatro destacados especialistas internacionales sobre la psicología de las migraciones y la comunidad. La amplitud de los temas abordados ofrece un escenario para reflexionar sobre las lagunas existentes en la literatura, poniendo de manifiesto la necesidad que hay en la psicología de las migraciones de realizar estudios internacionales e interdisciplinarios que aborden la complejidad de los múltiples niveles implicados, incluyendo aspectos culturales, políticos, económicos y ambientales.

**Palabras clave:** aculturación, comunidad, factores psicosociales, globalización, inmigración, conflictos culturales internacionales, inmigrantes, migrantes.

Over the past few decades, immigration has been one of the greatest issues of concern to Europeans and, for centuries, has regularly arisen as a major concern in

the Americas. By the same token, emigration, particularly of young and skilled workers, has been a serious problem both for communities in less developed countries and for the immigrants themselves struggling to adapt to unfamiliar and often unwelcoming cultures and economic and political systems. What are the psychological and social parameters of, and potential interventions for, those problems as they affect individuals, families, and communities, both in the places of

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\* Versión en castellano disponible en [Spanish version available at]: [www.psychosocial-intervention.org](http://www.psychosocial-intervention.org)

origin and also in host communities? That is the focus of this special issue.

The World Migration Report 2010 (International Organization for Migration, 2010) shows that the number of international migrants around the world was estimated at 214 million in 2010 with Europe now hosting the largest number (over 70 million). If emigration continues to increase at the same pace as during the past 20 years, international migration would reach over 400 million by 2050. The global economic crisis, political unrest in the Muslim world, and Northern reactions to immigration from the South are issues that compete for attention in international news of late. These issues are not typically connected, but they could not be more interrelated. Globalization of labor, commerce, and information technology are important factors in all three issues. Economic and ethnic-political problems are a major driver of migration. And economic competition and related fears, as well as ethnic and religious xenophobia, fuel the prejudice and discrimination migrants experience worldwide.

In addition, even greater numbers of people migrate within countries. Mass internal migrations of unskilled workers from rural to urban areas and emigration of skilled workers and students have posed challenges for many developing countries. As with international migration, domestic migration is assumed to take place primarily for economic reasons, including rural to urban migration for industrial employment (which encompasses the largest numbers, especially in developing countries such as China), as well as urban to rural migration (or suburban development, which is more common in developed countries), and seasonal migration to work in agriculture and tourism. Aside from those “pull” factors, “push” factors include war and political unrest, genocide, famine, and systematic oppression. The papers in the present issue include some of these issues, but delve beyond simple “push-pull” causes of migration.

### ***Relevance to Psychosocial Intervention***

Interest in migration/acclulturation has increased significantly within community psychology over the past decade. A good example of this fruitful interest is the 12/08 issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* on “Changes among Host Individuals and Communities in Their Adaptation to Immigrant Populations” which reconceptualizes acculturation by focusing more on ecological processes, historical contexts, and power inequities. This concern transcends the boundaries of community psychology. The *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* has devoted a recent issue to an intense debate and critical analysis of the relevance and impact of studies of acculturation and of cross-cultural psychology in general (Chirkov, 2009; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010).

In this sense, significant progress has been made at the crossroads of cultural and community psychology and action-oriented research (Kral, Ramírez-García, Aber, Masood, Dutta & Todd, 2011; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010). This debate has moved toward a conclusion that power and contextual factors are critical to the processes and problems all three communities—migrant, sending, and receiving—are confronting, and so, migrant research must be responsive to community needs and oriented towards action and positive social change. In addition, it must be carried out using a multi-method approach in order to capture in-depth the structural conditions of the receiving contexts, the impact of those conditions on the lives of migrant communities, and the experiences of individuals, families and groups involved in migrant/acclulturative transitions. Specifically, this debate draws attention to the need to overcome a certain “culturalism” in research agendas and make way for studies on relevant psychosocial issues such as psychological well-being, social integration, or the reduction of discrimination and prejudice. Also this debate emphasizes the role of variables that can facilitate structural-level change, such as influencing social policies and programs. It has drawn attention to the need for the scientific community to increase its efforts to translate theories and research results into effective interventions, and to build active and productive coalitions and partnerships with community members, social organizations, and policy-makers.

But how can we translate this action-research orientation specifically in terms of psychosocial intervention? The obvious answer is that migrant individuals and families experience high levels of stress, as shown by several of the articles in this issue, and may benefit from effective counseling and other forms of psychological intervention. As important as that implication may be, that is not the main focus of this issue. Instead, we are especially interested in the role of community in the behavioral and psychological responses to migration. In the face of the tidal wave of human migration described above, in all of its forms and causes, what impact does it have on communities and other social support and social capital networks, both those left behind and those receiving migrants? How does it affect individual migrants and families, as well as the attitudes, behavior, and wellbeing of residents in host communities? These answers to these questions, in turn, bring us closer to the following question: what community-based psychosocial interventions are effective in controlling migration, when and where they may be most appropriate, and how might migration be accommodated in ways that are best for all concerned?

This special issue grew out of a featured symposium on community and migration at the third International Conference on Community Psychology held in Puebla, Mexico, in June 2010, which included papers that developed into four of the six main articles in this

issue. With the addition of two more original articles and four commentaries by leading scholars in the field, the special issue provides a forum for research and ideas on the effects of migration in various communities around the world. International dissemination and sharing of theoretical, research, and application ideas are not only indispensable to enrich the knowledge base, they are necessary precursor and ingredient for informed and mutually beneficial transnational and intercultural collaboration. International collaboration promotes the research imagination, is an antidote against arrogance, and permits a greater role for social networks based on sharing different traditions in confronting similar problems. As Perkins (2009) has summarized, potential benefits of international collaboration are to increase knowledge, learn about and utilize research designs, interventions and theories, tackle complex social issues from multiple perspectives, and strengthen our legitimacy in the social and behavioural sciences, offering evidence of a global critical mass of interest and expertise to our own and other disciplines.

The issue features studies across an array of geographic areas and content foci; Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania are represented, with focal populations ranging from youth, to sex-trafficking victims, to traditional labor migrants, to educated elites. It includes considerable international geo-cultural diversity, with papers on sub-Sahara-African émigrés to North America and Europe, Muslim youth in New Zealand, immigrant youth in Italy, public attitudes toward human trafficking in Moldova, rural migrant workers in Chinese cities, and more.

In the current special issue, various perspectives and studies on migrant and immigrant populations around the world are presented, with special attention to social and political oppression, liberation or at least participation, and various forms of wellness. We will consider how each project and paper relates and contributes, not only to a comparative international understanding of migrant community adaptation and acculturation, but also to a multi-level, interdisciplinary eco-psycho-political framework of research on migrant communities and on social reactions to migration (Christens & Perkins, 2008; Perkins & Procentese, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2008a & b; Siankam, this issue).

## Overview of Issue

The first article by Italian researchers (Francesca Cristini, Luca Scacchi, Massimo Santinello, and Alessio Vieno) and an American collaborator (Douglas D. Perkins) examines how the experiences of discrimination in immigrant youth in Italy are related to depressive symptoms. They studied 214 immigrant adolescents in two small cities in northern Italy and, as expected, found that discrimination has a significant

detrimental effect on the foreign-born students' psychological well-being. The only cultural identity or school social support factor this study found that significantly protected against depression was support from teachers. None of the other analyzed factors (ethnic identity exploration and commitment, national identity, classmates' support, school support for multiculturalism) predicted depressive symptoms of immigrant youth. Thus teachers appear to play a rare and important role in helping immigrant youth emotionally cope in the face of the dual stresses of migration and discrimination. This research on the effects of oppression (discrimination) and the supportive and empowering role of teachers exemplifies work at the individual and relational levels of socio-cultural capital and offers clear support for higher levels of enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, teacher training, and school policy.

The article by Jaime Stuart and Colleen Ward focuses on the acculturative, integrative, and adaptive experiences of Muslim young people in New Zealand. Their study uses mixed methods, including a series of community workshops, to explore issues of negotiating and graphically representing multiple ethnic and religious youth identities; and the meaning, definition, and achievement of personal success in that culture and society. They find that young Muslims aspire to achieve success in personal, social, material, and religious domains and to balance multiple identities and competing demands from family, the Muslim community, friends, and the dominant culture. They conclude that Muslim youth strive to achieve this balance using various cognitive strategies, such as alternating or blending orientations or minimizing differences. This study also focuses particularly on the individual and group levels of psychosocial acculturation and empowerment, again with implications for community programs, civil liberties, and social policies in multicultural societies.

Next, Jill Robinson's article explores the process and public discourse of human trafficking in Eastern Europe. She compares public perceptions and knowledge of trafficking in Moldova to those of academics, government officials, and nongovernmental organizations. Qualitative discourse analysis reveals multiple and complex levels of understanding on the part of ordinary citizens, including impressive insights into political, economic, as well as cultural, explanations for trafficking. While using individual perceptions of a social problem affecting other individuals, this study reaches further to address implications at the institutional, community, and societal levels of culture and policy-making.

The article by Qinqwen Xu and Neal Palmer is the only one in this issue on domestic migrant communities. The hundreds of millions of workers who have migrated great distances from China's rural interior to its industrial cities, mostly on the coast, represent the

single largest human migration in history. One important strength of this study is the use of a rare nationally representative Chinese sample that included over 1,000 migrant households. Xu and Palmer studied subgroups of migrant workers and how social networks, life satisfaction and political participation vary among those groups. As with international migrants, these migrants depend heavily on both prior (rural) and current (urban) kin and wider social networks to obtain employment, housing, financial assistance, and other forms of support. By considering psychological, social network, participatory, and economic aspects of the lives of migrants, this article addresses many of the levels (from individual and family through community and societal) and domains of capital (socio-cultural, political, and economic) in the interdisciplinary eco-psycho-political framework of research on migrant communities. It also implicitly considers the dynamics of moving from a state of oppression through processes of social support, participation, and empowerment toward a goal of wellness, although that goal remains a distant one for most migrants.

Benjamin Siankam's paper considers the causes, effects, and understandings of medical "brain drain," or the migration of educated health professionals, from Sub-Saharan Africa to the United States. He applies qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with émigré physicians to identify the combined influences of structural factors, individual agency, and power in decisions to leave home countries and communities that desperately need their medical skills and services. It is these same global disparities in health, mortality, and especially in health resources, expertise, and financial support that ultimately make some doctors decide to emigrate and others to stay or return. But it is not a simple, economic push-pull equation, but rather a complex and changing interaction of factors at different levels in many different situational contexts. Unlike the others, this study directly and explicitly applies Prilleltensky's (2008b) and Christens and Perkins' (2008) eco-psychopolitical validity framework. Siankam examines the political domain especially, but also economic and sociocultural causes of migration of medical professionals. It considers states of oppression and wellness and attempts to connect them through an analysis of power dynamics. It elucidates individuals' stories in the context of societal-level problems, needs, and constraints.

The article by Virginia Paloma and Vicente Manzano-Arrondo argues that theories and values from liberation psychology can enhance scholarship on organizations that serve or represent immigrants. They address issues of immigrant acculturation and asymmetrical power relationships in host communities and societies. They find that, intentionally or not, the internal dynamics of many organizations serve to perpetuate the status quo of oppression of immigrant populations, but that organizations have great potential

to help create a more just and equitable multicultural society. Perhaps more than any other article in the issue, this one explicitly explores the temporal dimension of the eco-psycho-political validity paradigm in terms of its emphasis on liberatory processes to transform oppressive situations toward goals of wellbeing at all levels of society. Although it acknowledges both the individual and structural levels of analysis, it also focuses more on the meso-systemic organizational level of analysis and intervention, compared with the other studies.

The issue concludes with commentary articles by some of the most important and knowledgeable international experts on psychological issues related to human migration, including Dina Birman, Jana Sladkova and Meg Bond, Dan Landis, and Stuart Carr. Together, these commentaries confirm that this special issue reflects a growing interest, not only in migration issues in general, but on both a community and psychological focus on those issues in particular. The commentators find that the individual articles in the issue represent a global range of populations, geographic locales, topics and perspectives on migration. As Birman notes, all six articles reflect various community psychology principles: i.e., in taking an ecological perspective "that understands the impact of the larger environment on behaviors that are frequently seen as matters of individual choice or preference;" in questioning traditional and current mainstream assumptions about what represents "positive adjustment" or "well-being" by considering how context affects or even determines the relationship of particular behaviors or sources of support to adjustment, which itself may be viewed as "positive" or "negative" depending on different and changing individual, group, community, cultural, and societal standards; and in taking a global and interdisciplinary perspective by considering the complex motives and sociopolitical and economic contexts that drive migration in countries of origin. Sladkova and Bond similarly identify issue-wide themes of (1) enriching the individualistic bias in most psychological studies by understanding how multiple levels of context affect migrants, (2) issues of resilience and spaces of resistance in acculturation research and intervention, and (3) challenges of recognizing gender and other forms of diversity within migrant communities and in patterns of, and responses to, migration. Landis offers several helpful ideas for intervention as well as much constructive criticism to the authors and the field, particularly regarding methodological issues. His critiques, if applied to the next generation of migration studies, should help scholars design more effective migration-related interventions. Carr goes so far as to see this special issue as heralding "the coalescence of a new field in social sciences – the psychology of global mobility." He agrees that the contributions in this special issue are both interdisciplinary and cross-level, and reflect an open systems perspective. "Political

motivation, sociological networks, community inclusion, educational institutions, socio-cultural identity processes, and organizational processes are all represented in the collection...The special issue is about a developing global consciousness, and a role that psychology as one discipline and applied profession can play in this process" (Carr, this issue).

## Conclusions

Given the breadth and diversity of this special issue, there are no simple, clear and consistent answers to the questions posed at the start of this introductory article. For example, what impact does migration have on communities and other social support and social capital networks, both those left behind and those receiving migrants? The papers here find that problems such as brain drain and human trafficking may have a severely negative impact on sending communities and that many serious challenges of acculturation, integration, discrimination, and acceptance remain for migrant and receiving communities. But, more often than not, it is also true that migrants strengthen host communities by providing needed labor and cultural diversity. In addition, they often help even their families and communities of origin by making valuable remittances and other connections. Thus, migration's effects on communities are impossible to weigh in balance as either positive or negative—the effects are great but entail a complex mix of winners and losers and with global migration not only inevitable but increasing, it is vital that we identify and assist the "losers".

How does migration affect individual migrants and families, as well as the attitudes, behavior, and well-being of residents in host communities? Again, there are no simple answers, but according to several of the papers in this issue, the lives of most migrants and their families are exceedingly difficult, certainly more challenging than many of those in the receiving communities. But migrants are almost always escaping dire situations. So, the net effect of migration on individuals and families, as with communities and societies, may not be determinable; again, though, we must endeavor to provide effective interventions to help those experiencing problems or, better still, prevent those problems from occurring.

Thus, finally, we must ask: what community-based psychosocial interventions are effective in controlling migration; when and where may they be most appropriate; and how might we accommodate migration in ways that are best for all concerned? Some of the following articles provide specific answers. For example, the results by Cristini et al. suggest that interventions to help immigrant adolescents cope with (and we would add combat) discrimination and prevent the resulting depression and other symptoms of acculturative stress should be sure to include a central protecti-

ve role for school teachers. Stuart and Ward's sample of immigrant Muslim youth suggests that acculturative balance may be found in various specific cognitive strategies of ethnic identity development.

Most of the articles in this issue simply point us in important directions, such as the need Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo find for organizations that serve or represent immigrants to restructure themselves in ways that allow them to concentrate on liberating and empowering, rather than merely helping, immigrant populations. As always, context matters, however—as Xu and Palmer found in China, until a society provides more meaningful opportunities for migrant political participation, social networks may remain the primary source of aid and support. Robinson reminds us that policies in countries of origin may play as great or greater a role than receiving countries in creating migration, including forced migration. Siankam's adaptation of the eco-psychopolitical validity framework (Christens & Perkins, 2008; Perkins & Procentese, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2008b) implies that solutions to problems of migration must be identified and implemented at all levels and using all forms of capital—socio-cultural, political, economic and physical.

The breadth of topics in this special issue helps to address wide-ranging gaps in the literature, but more psychological and social research must connect ecologically across multiple levels and to cultural, political, economic, and environmental studies of migration and community. As diverse as the countries and populations studied are, the emphasis of most articles was on the individual behavioral/psychological and micro-relational levels and the socio-cultural and, to a slightly lesser extent, political and economic contexts. Some articles also emphasized the organizational or other levels of analysis. But important geo-spatial and physical (built and natural) environmental influences on migration and its impacts were largely ignored in the present articles. More theory and research are needed in that area as well as on the dynamic processes of liberation and empowerment and other interventions to achieve individual, relational, community, and societal wellness (García-Ramírez, de la Mata, Paloma, & Hernandez-Plaza, 2011). As Carr (this issue) notes, the remaining major challenge is to connect psychological theory, research, and evidence with policy-making. "To achieve more credibility in the policy domain, psychology will need itself to become more political, and overtly skilled in social advocacy. As these papers remind us, we will need to build more stakeholder alliances, including between research and community groups."

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## End Note

The editors and authors of this issue thank the following reviewers for their insightful comments, which improved each article and greatly strengthened the issue as a whole:

Elena Briones  
Michelle Fine  
Fei Guo  
Marisol Navas  
Isaac Prilleltensky  
Neville Robertson  
Irma Serrano-García  
Christopher Sonn  
Edison Trickett  
Catherine L. Ward  
Colleen Ward  
Bin Wu  
Hirokazu Yoshikawa  
Michelle Fine.