



diversityabroad

THE GLOBAL IMPACT EXCHANGE

A Quarterly Publication of Diversity Abroad

FALL 2020 EDITION

INCLUSION & BELONGING IN
TIMES OF GLOBAL CRISIS



diversitynetwork.org | members@diversityabroad.org | 510-982-0635 ext. 704

Crisis of Self, Crisis of Community: An Ecological Understanding of Inclusion and Belonging During COVID-19 in U.S. Global Education Practice

SUSANNE FELD

Graduate Student, International Higher Education, Lesley University

LOUISE MICHELLE VITAL, PHD

Assistant Professor of International Higher Education,
Lesley University

COVID-19 has altered the practice of global education seemingly overnight. Borders have closed, instruction has moved online, and the influence of globalization on our daily lives has changed. Emboldened by the spread of the pandemic, some have called for a reimagining of globalization (Goffman, 2020) and others have discussed the value of collaboration within the global community (Altman, 2020; Dervis & Strauss, 2020; James, 2020). These trends raise concerns about the future of global education and how to foster a sense of belonging in students and colleagues at higher education institutions (HEIs). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) conceptualized “sense of belonging” as feeling connected, important, and mattering to others, and in its absence, one feels a “sense of alienation, rejection, social isolation, loneliness, or marginality” (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 2). When a crisis strikes an entire community, it is critical that global education practitioners are aware of the implications for individuals in various contexts and gain an ecological understanding (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) of inclusion and belonging within HEIs during times of global crisis.

Ecological Understanding of Inclusion and Belonging: Implication of COVID-19

Ecological Systems Theory explains that individuals develop within five systems and the relationships between these systems shape our environment and affect our development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). COVID-19 highlighted how unprepared we were for how the crisis would affect our practice. To comprehend how the pandemic shaped our collective sense of belonging on campuses in the US, we must understand our various ecological environments.

Collective crisis provokes dichotomous and seemingly incompatible emotional experiences in the individual (Biancolli, 2020). It leads to increased feelings of connectedness and solidarity (Raymond, 2018). Conversely, as the collective crisis is prioritized, individual needs can be overshadowed. For example, experiences of micro- and macro-aggressions in our professional communities have been dismissed as petty grievances as the pandemic continues (Mani, 2020). The stress of having to reconcile the simultaneous experiences of a stronger bond within one’s community yet an increased feeling of isolation has strained opportunities

for relationship building. This takes place in the *microsystem*, the environment most immediate to the individual and described as “a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 39), including the institutions where we work and study. Nearly all facets of the higher education microsystem were impacted by the pandemic.

The *mesosystem* is a network of microsystems and “comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). These include the individual units where we work (e.g., student affairs, academic affairs, operations) and the programs and services accessed by students (e.g., international student advising, residence life, library). When the seriousness of COVID-19 became apparent, many of these distinct units found themselves members of united task forces that had to quickly develop plans of action to ensure the continuity of the services they provided. Staff had to transfer curricula to the online space, keep abreast of immigration legislation that affected international students, and examine their budgets as uncertainty about the future loomed. These were all vitally important considerations. Yet the time and energy spent on those issues subtracted from time used for supporting the sense of belonging for international students and professionals from diverse backgrounds, innovating in our practice, and, more simply, having a cheerful lunch with a colleague or practicing self-care.

The *exosystem* “comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). Multiple decisions had to be made in a short period of time within a shifting external environment predicated on the nature of the public health crisis. The majority of students and staff

were left out of decision-making processes and felt excluded as they were impacted by important changes originating from a small group of senior administrators. Students were required to leave their residential campus communities and cease in-person interactions with peers; this most adversely impacted international students without local homes to return to. Many administrative colleagues working in global education faced being furloughed or losing their jobs.

The *macrosystem* is the “societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture” and consists of the “overarching patterns of characteristics of a given culture or subculture, with reference to the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, life-styles, opportunity structures, and hazards that are embedded in each of these broader systems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). HEIs and their community members were affected by the broader U.S. culture. As institutional leaders were projecting messages about the strength and unity in their communities in the face of a constantly changing crisis, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced that international students would face deportation if their Fall 2020 courses were taught 100% online. Though this decision was later reversed, the eight days it stood caused needless fear among international students and their families. Critically, the decision underscored the broader cultural sentiment that international students did not matter to the US and did not belong.

The *chronosystem* “encompasses change or consistency over time not only in the characteristics of the person but also of the environment in which that person lives” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). This system requires global education practitioners to understand the historic and contemporary realities of inclusion and exclusion that are embedded in the structures and policies of the U.S. government and higher education system. It means being reflexive about

xenophobic movements in U.S. history, including the genocide of indigenous populations in the Americas and the theft of their lands, enslavement of individuals of African descent, internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, and the xenophobic responses to infectious disease dating to the 19th century (White, 2020). Within a higher education context, women, People of Color, and religious minorities experienced exclusion and segregated learning well into the 20th century. These legacies influence our work today. Building on this long history of xenophobia, the U.S. president racialized and politicized a health crisis, resulting in trauma for many groups in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2020) and contributing to their feelings of isolation.

Final Thoughts

Viewing COVID-19 from an ecological lens reveals issues of belonging and exclusion. For example, technology has amplified dissenting voices hiding behind social media handles.

Political strife and acts of xenophobia continue in U.S. governance and higher education. The deep wounds and partisan divisions that have emerged in response to COVID-19 will seemingly outlive the pandemic. The web of relationships implied in our ecological environments and the support provided by global educators have been sidelined, which has imperiled the connectivity we seek in our professional and learning spaces. This is why, even as we share the collective experience of living through a worldwide pandemic, we are suffering from increased feelings of isolation. As global education practitioners, we must work towards equity in our schools and communities in this divisive climate. Understanding Ecological Systems Theory facilitates the development of strategies toward this endeavor. Though inundated with a series of new professional challenges in this unprecedented time, anchoring the promotion of inclusion and belonging at the forefront of our practice will be increasingly important for our global education profession.

References

- Altman, S. A. (2020, May 20). Will Covid-19 have a lasting impact on globalization? *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/05/will-covid-19-have-a-lasting-impact-on-globalization>
- Bassett, R. M. (2020). Sustaining the values of tertiary education during the COVID-19 crisis. *International Higher Education*, 102, 5–7.
- Biancolli, A. (2020, March 15). Coronavirus and 9/11: Americans' response to crisis. *Times Union*. <https://www.timesunion.com/7dayarchive/article/Coronavirus-and-9-11-Americans-response-to-15130086.php>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *Readings on the Development of Children*, 2(1), 37–43.
- Dervis, K. & Strauss, S. (2020, March 6). What COVID-19 means for international cooperation. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-covid-19-means-for-international-cooperation/>

Goffman, E. (2020). In the wake of COVID-19, is glocalization our sustainability future?. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 16(1), 48–52.

Human Rights Watch. (2020, May 12). *Covid-19 fueling anti-Asian racism and xenophobia worldwide*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide#>

James, H. (2020, March 4). *Could coronavirus bring about the ‘waning’ of globalization?* World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/globalization-coronavirus-covid19-epidemic-change-economic-political>

Mani, B. V. (2020, May 14). Fighting the shadow pandemic. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/14/inclusive-teaching-needed-help-combat-xenophobia-racism-and-discrimination-brought>

Raymond, R. (2018, October 1). *Disaster collectivism: How communities rise together to respond to crises*. Shareable. <https://www.shareable.net/disaster-collectivism-how-communities-rise-together-to-respond-to-crises/>

Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. *Research in Community Mental Health*, 2, 163182.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students’ sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.

White, A. I. (2020). Historical linkages: Epidemic threat, economic risk, and xenophobia. *The Lancet*, 395(10232), 1250–1251.

