

### Major contributions of the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory: Incorporating Status Hierarchies into Models of Higher-order Contexts

One of the most important extensions of the bioecological model is offered by Margaret Beale Spencer's *phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory* (PVEST; Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 1997). She extended Bronfenbrenner's ecological models in two directions: top-down and bottom-up. From the *top-down*, she critiqued previous models for failing to include the deeply rooted *societal systems of opportunity and inequity* that are patterned into the institutions and activities that make up children's complex social ecologies. These features of higher-order contexts may be invisible to researchers from the dominant culture, but they shape and permeate all the other systems that make up children's living conditions and interaction partners.

PVEST extends the ecological model from the *bottom up* by highlighting the role of *phenomenological processes* in filtering experience and shaping development. Phenomenological processes refer to the ways that individuals understand, interpret, and make meaning out of their everyday experiences. These deeply subjective social cognitive and information-processing activities, which have their own developmental course, influence children and youth's perceptions by acting as filters that focus attention, make inferences, and extract messages from their daily interactions with other people, socially-structured tasks (e.g., school), and societal communications. A focus on phenomenology foregrounds the unique perspectives of children and youth as processes that must be considered if we want to understand their developmental paths.

Important insights follow from PVEST that should help researchers let go of assumptions about the development of children and youth from ethnic minority and racialized groups that highlight deficits, environmental risk, and maladaptive pathways. These need to be expanded to include assets, protective factors, and productive pathways. But most important, PVEST admonishes researchers that many of the aspects of functioning, especially during adolescence, that have been identified as indicators of "poor psychological or social functioning" (e.g., disciplinary problems, drop-out, delinquency) should be reconceptualized as "*coping reactions*." These depict the ways that youth find to come to grips with and react to the systemic and interpersonal inequities, prejudices, and discrimination that they encounter in their everyday lives.

From this perspective, behaviors that researchers find unproductive, and perhaps detrimental to adolescents' long-term development (like drop out), can be considered adaptive reactions or ways of coping that allow them to escape from the toxic messages and corrosive experiences they would otherwise have to deal with in school. Such a flip in perspective encourages researchers to stop asking standard deficit-oriented questions (like "What is wrong with these adolescents and their families?") and turn around and ask questions of higher-order contexts and systems, like "How are we creating stressors and other hazardous conditions (e.g., in schools) that adolescents are being forced to negotiate?"

If you love meta-theories, we invite you to take a closer look at Spencer's original seminal article. It will turn your head inside out-- in a good way!

Spencer, M.B. (2006). Phenomenology and ecological systems theory: Development of diverse groups. In W. Damon, & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology, vol. 1* (R. Lerner, Ed.): *Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed.), (pp. 829-893). New York: Wiley