

Snowden, L. R. (2005). Racial, cultural and ethnic disparities in health and mental health: Toward theory and research at community levels. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 35, 1-8.

keywords: collective efficacy, social capital, social equilibrium, social dynamics

This article suggests that until we begin to think of change on a community level instead of an individual level, little progress will be made in providing mental health services to culturally diverse and ethnic minority communities. This theoretical paper discusses the importance of (a) population thinking, (b) collective efficacy, (c) social capital and social norms, and (d) social equilibrium and social dynamics for mental health services research and other health fields and the link between these concepts. According to the author, “community-level knowledge has profound intervention-related implications at policy levels” (p. 1). Snowden’s discussion of these topics is summarized below:

### (a) Population Thinking

Snowden describes his research of racial, cultural, and ethnic disparities within communities and neighborhoods in the state of California and illustrates the diversity represented within the state. In this context, he discusses the meaning of population thinking, in which one is “sensitive to underlying structures and processes of social change” (p. 3), being careful to consider the impact that the environment of the community has upon the well-being of all of its children and families. For example, an improvement in the overall environment of a school (possibly due to a policy change or implementation of a new program) might have a positive impact on a teacher which in turn is reflected in an improvement in his/her interactions with students.

“Community level knowledge has profound intervention-related implications at policy levels” (p. 1).

### (b) Collective Efficacy

According to Snowden, collective efficacy, or the willingness to act on behalf of one’s community, differentiates well-functioning communities from poorly functioning communities. During this discussion, he cites an example of the misconception that crime rates are higher in minority communities because of the racial and ethnic composition, when in fact high crime is likely more a result of a lack of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is often reflected in well-functioning community service organizations, churches, and informal supports through strong neighbor networks.

### (c) Social Capital and Social Norms

For purposes of this discussion, Snowden expands upon the idea that social capital refers to social norms operating at a group level, and he emphasizes that norms that include social capital are facilitative—“they reconcile competing personal interests in the name of a common goal” (p. 4). He further states that norms can change and cites as an example that after a shift away from blaming victims in domestic violence situations, the judicial system responded with harsher penalties for perpetrators of these crimes. These norms improve economic productivity and social well being. Snowden further states that “social capital is a key step along the road to a comprehensive account of prosocial norms” (p. 5).

Snowden stresses that it is critical for social capital to be analyzed on a group as well as an individual level and further emphasizes that this enables psychologists to analyze prosocial norms—things such as engagement, trust, and reciprocity—from a broader perspective.

*Continued...*

## (d) Social Equilibrium and Social Dynamics

Because conditions within the community change, Snowden argues that social capital is not static and that prosocial norms are susceptible to the competition of “actors” within a group. He further states that the balance of forces between prosocial norms and opposing norms define a state of equilibrium within the community.

## Conclusion

In this article, Snowden expresses concern regarding the lack of knowledge in the field about the impact of the concepts of population thinking, collective efficacy, social capital and social norms, and social equilibrium and social dynamics upon communities in considering the health and overall well-being of children and families. The author further expresses his interest in advancing theory and research at social and community levels and states that community-level knowledge has intervention-related implications at policy levels.

Snowden concludes this article by stressing that it is critical that professionals within the field better understand how prosocial norms and practices are formed, how they compete against opposing norms, and how they respond to changes within the community. He further states that public policy literature and academic policy analysis are critical to understanding social problems, and this knowledge will substantially contribute to policy development related to important social issues.