

# Ecological Theory and Community Intervention: The Devil is in the Details

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# The Basic Premise

- “Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105)

# Alternative Paradigms for Community Intervention: Rocket Science or Human Interaction

- Community Intervention as the application of technology (Rocket science/solvable problems)
- Community Intervention as a transactional process between people, programs, and settings living in specific ecological contexts (“wicked problems”/no “right answer”, “best way”)

# People and Particles Differ

A focus on program technology and implementation reflects a rocket-science view of community intervention

- But people are reflexive/volitional/have agency, not so with particles
- “While particles are attracted to one another, they don’t fall in love” (Lee Cronbach, 1986)

# People as Populations and Communities Differ

- POPULATIONS more likely to define individuals who share geographic boundaries, demographic characteristics, or risk factors
- COMMUNITIES more likely to define individuals in the context of such factors as a shared social identity and some social connections or social capital
- From a community perspective, populations are different than aggregates of individuals.

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# People in Community Context: An Ecological Perspective

- community as level of analysis and intervention
- Seeks out cultural/contextual diversity
- involves research questions and designs that include, and often focus on, structural inequalities
- integrates qualitative and quantitative ways of knowing
- is directed toward understanding the intersection of culture, context, and community
- assumes our behavior is influenced by forces, resources, and inequalities expressed in multiple levels of our ecological context

# The Spirit of Ecological Community Intervention

- Intervention theory & practice informed by an ecological perspective: 3 Steps
  - Community assessment & the ecology of individual lives in context
  - Development of collaborative relationships
  - Community development/Creating community resources as goal

# # 1: Community Assessment: Learning About the Community and Vice Versa

- All interventions are nested in varying ecologies that affect
  - (a) the congruence of the intervention with local norms, problems, and solutions and
  - (b) the relationships between interventionists and the local context



# Ecological Principles Guiding Community Assessment

- Adaptation—Ecology of Lives
- Interdependence—Ripple effects/Unintended Consequences
- Cycling of resources—people, settings, and events on which to build interventions
- Succession—community history and hopes in intervention development

# Ecological Questions Addressed by Community Assessment

- What range of possible community-level interventions will the community tolerate and support?
- What different groups or social settings in the community can be engaged in the intervention to coordinate various additive and incremental change efforts?
- What other existing community organizations have comparable goals and resources to collaborate with over time?

# More Examples

- What processes/structures are necessary to ensure that the intervention project supports with the hopes and aspirations of the community?
- What community-level outcomes are locally relevant which can be targeted and assessed in terms of intervention impact?

# Becoming Known in the Community

- We all want to know who we're dealing with
- Developing a local eco-identity: Redefining the professional role
  - Out of (professional) role activities
  - Becoming an informal resource
  - Showing up at community occasions
  - Seeking out diverse settings in the community

# # 2: Developing a Collaborative Commitment

- The spirit of collaboration manifested in
  - (a) the amount of energy devoted to collaborative relationship building,
  - (b) time devoted to getting to know the community
  - © negotiating community influence in selecting problems and intervention strategies, and
  - (d) the vigilance adopted in seeking out both positive and negative ripple effects of the intervention process (not just the intervention) in the local ecology.

# Collaboration: Deconstructing The Rationales

- The Big 5:
  - Moral
  - Pragmatic/Utilitarian
  - Ideological
  - Epistemological
  - Local Impact of Knowledge
  
- This is where the devil is in the details

# Pragmatic/Utilitarian Rationale

- People simply won't give you the time of day after having been "studied to death"
  - Tuskegee as literal example
  - We need to collaborate to get the data
    - NIMH ethnic minority recruitment issues

Issues of incentives/bribery

# Ideological Rationales: Revolutionary and Evolutionary

- REVOLUTIONARY: Sociopolitical Goals
- Friere/Fals Borda/Foucault
- Knowledge is power: who controls it, who uses it, how it can serve the have nots
- Goal of Working on Consciousness  
Raising, Mobilization, Data for Community  
Action



# Ideological Rationale: Evolutionary Democratizing

- Earls and “Democratization” of the research process with adolescents
  - Youth generally excluded from shaping research about them
    - Under what conditions is symmetry between the input of adolescents and adults achieved?
- Lerner and Policy Relevant Research forming “learning communities with citizens”—Partnership notion

# Epistemological Rationale: Collaboration and Valid Knowledge

Does collaboration corrupt or increase the validity of knowledge gained through the collaborative relationship?

- Rocket Science or Recreating the laboratory: Valid knowledge related to experimental design; minimalist influence of knowledge gatherer on knowledge provider.
- Ecological Community Intervention: Valid knowledge related to engaged relationship between knowledge providers and knowledge gatherers.

# Epistemological Cont: Collaboration and Valid Knowledge

- “Some unintended consequences of rigorous research” (Argyris, 1968)
  - Laboratory research relationship comparable to workers and management in industry
    - Dropping out
    - Doing what the researcher wants
    - Covert hostility
    - Doing it for the “wrong” reasons (money)

# Epistemological Cont.

- 4 levels of community dialogue (e.g. what researchers might hear) that reflect varying degrees of the authentic expression of beliefs and perspectives:
  - (a) public discourse
  - (b) hidden transcripts (subordinates gathering outside the gaze of power and constructing a sharply critical and cultural discourse)
  - © coded defiance (veiled expression of hidden transcripts in public discourse)
  - (d) open defiance.
    - (Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila, and Wallerstein (2003)).

# Local Usefulness Rationale: Collaboration and Local Knowledge

- Theory is general and knowledge is local:
- Collaboration enhances the possibilities for discovering, capitalizing on, and contributing to local knowledge.
- Collaboration increases local influence over problems, methods, action steps
- Collaboration increases chances for sustainability of something

# #3: Creating/Conserving/Consolidating Community Resources

- Primary Goal of Community Intervention is to increase community resources
- To what extent does the intervention impact:
  - Community/context resource development (e.g. relational networks, material resources, control)
  - Avenues/mechanisms and resources for ongoing and future action planning and implementing

# Proximal Examples of Processes/Outcomes That Serve Community Resource Development

- Creation of new needed social settings
- Increased interdependence between settings that serve protective functions and health promotion
- The activation of previously competent but uninvolved citizens in local campaigns/issues
- Strengthening of weak ties between CBOs & specialized expertise
- Increased CBO development of evaluation data
- Organizational willingness to develop ongoing internal evaluation skills and projects
- Increased competencies of citizens to access and confront local service organizations to develop new services;
- Increased community ability to assess/utilize outside interventionists

# Implications

- Community intervention involves set of relational processes as well as specific intervention-specific activities
- Whose goal is to create both scientifically valid and socially useful outcomes simultaneously, with the possibility that
- The specific intervention may fail but the community may be better off for having participated in it.