

Culture, Context, and Community Intervention: An Ecological Perspective and Example

Edison J. Trickett
University of Miami

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)

Social and Natural Sciences Metaphor; Differences Make a Difference

- Alternative Paradigms for Community Intervention

Rocket Science (program as technology to be implemented)

– There are answers—”call Houston”

–Systemic Event in Local Ecology (intervention as relational and co-developed)

– “Wicked problems’, no single “best way”

Falling for the manual vs. Falling in love

- “While particles are attracted to one another, they don’t fall in love” (Lee Cronbach, 1986)
- People are reflexive/volitional/have agency, create meanings, “fall in love”, develop culture, traditions, not so with particles

Ecology in Community Intervention: 3 Iterative Processes

- (1) Community Understanding
- (2) Working Together—Collaboration
- (3) Resource Creation as Fundamental Intervention Goal

1: Community Understanding: 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

Examples of Relevant Questions Addressed by Assessment

- What processes/structures are necessary to ensure that the intervention project supports 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?
- What is the local theory of the intervention focus?

Ecological Principles Guiding Community Assessment

Adaptation—Ecology of Lives

acculturation in values/foods/
generations/technology

Interdependence—Ripple effects/ Unintended Consequences

Increased family/communal interaction
Researcher learning

Ecological Principles Cont.

Cycling of resources—people, settings, and events on which to build interventions

- Indigenizing Group
- Qasgiq (Communal House)

Succession—community history and hopes in intervention development

- Cultural revitalization as superordinate goal
- Cultural traditions as vehicle

Vice Versa: Becoming Known in the Community

- We all want to know who we're dealing with (“Here come the anthros”)
- Developing a local eco-identity: Redefining the professional role
 - Out of (professional) role activities
 - Becoming an informal resource
 - Showing up at community occasions

2: Collaborative Commitment: Caring for Culture and Context

- Why Collaborate?
- 5 Reasons:
 - Moral
 - Pragmatic/Utilitarian/Instrumental
 - Ideological—Democratic/Revolutionary
 - Epistemological
 - Local Impact of Knowledge

 - This is where the devil is in the details

The Spirit of Collaboration

- The spirit of collaboration manifested in role definition
 - (a) the amount of energy devoted to collaborative relationship building,
 - (b) time devoted to getting to know the community more generally

Collaborative Commitment Cont.

–In the Intervention Process

© degree of community influence in selecting problems and intervention strategies, and

(d) the vigilance in seeking out both positive and negative ripple effects of the intervention process (not just the intervention) in the local ecology.

Step: #3:

Creating Empowering Community Resources as Intervention Goal

- Community Development—To what extent does the intervention impact:
 - Immediate: Community/context resource development (e.g. relational networks, material resources, control)
 - Future: Avenues/mechanisms and resources for ongoing and future action planning and implementing

Proximal Resource Outcomes: Examples

- (a) The creation of new social settings serving a community-defined need (programs, services);
- (b) Increased interdependence between sectors of the community (police and schools; religious organizations and health services).
- (c) Strengthening of weak ties between community-based organizations and outside specialized expertise.

The Ecological Mind Set I: Researcher Buy-In

- To learning about the community as a system
- To crafting interventions self-consciously related to what is learned about the community as a system
- To looking at the intervention process as causing multiple ripples with costs and benefits associated with each.
- To care about the community as a community and its resources (capacity) as the intervention goal

Mindset II: Value Practice-Based Evidence

- We are all theorists of our own lives and communities (George Kelly)
 - Indigenous theory as a test of professional theorizing
 - Dialogue over whose evidence counts, why it should count, and how it should count

Alcohol Prevention In Alaska: Brief Example

- 15 year collaboration between Center for Alaska Native Health Research (CANHR) and Alaska Native communities
 - Multiple projects ranging from behavioral to biological
 - Initial focus on Alcohol Abuse Prevention among Adults

Clash of Cultures

Culture of Science

- “Rigor”
- Experimenter control of Design/Measures
- Quantitative Priority
- Timeliness

Culture of Community

- Historical Mistrust
- Construct Mismatch
- “We don’t measure anything”

Developing a Shared Agenda

- A year of meetings to develop shared agenda
- Agreement on strengths/not deficits
- Importance of not speaking for others
- Listening to life stories

Life History Story Gathering

- Who to Invite?
 - Those who recovered from alcoholism and were totally abstinent
 - --Those who drank but did not suffer negative consequences (“under control”)

Search for Protective Factors

- Definition of wellness as balance or connection of all aspects of self—physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual— embedded in family and community relationships and integrally connected to the land.
- Becoming aware of these connections
- Qualitative Approach representing Community Knowledge and Experience

An Indigenous Model

- Protective Factors at 3 Ecological Levels
- ---Individual (self and communal mastery)
- --Family—(cohesion)
- --Community—(norms, opportunities for drinking)

Adapted for Adolescent Drinking/Suicide

- The “Indigenization” CBPR Process: Local Work Groups including Elders
 - (1) concept definition--wellness
 - (2) cultural translation of protective factors
 - (3) measurement development
 - (4) intervention development/planning process
 - (5) reflection on how it worked

Intervention Development

- (1) Indigenous culture affirming activities
- (2) Planned and Conducted by village elders/adults/parents
- (3) Intergenerational knowledge transmission
- (4) Focus on function not form
- (5) Selectively used
- (6) Embodying one or more protective factors

Intervention Modules: Example

- For example, in ‘watch the ice”, youth travel out on the river ice. Elder experts teach how to monitor the safety of the ice using visual cues and a tool called an *ayaruk*, a long, steel-tipped staff. A hook at the opposing end of the *ayaruk* allows a person to pull oneself out of the water if the ice underneath gives way..

Intervention Modules: Cont.

- This activity teaches the protective factor of *ellangneq*, of always being aware, in this case through specific awareness of the changing environment, one's relationship to it, and responsible actions in response.
- Following this activity, the group returns to the *Qasgiq*. Here, elders and parents discuss through personal narratives the connection of *ellangneq* to the lessons of ice safety, and implications regarding high-risk behavior and valuing one's own life.

Return to Ecological Principles

Getting to Know the Community

Collaboration

Community Development



Cultural Revitalization and Ripple Effects

Status of elders

Intergenerational Discussions

Gaining Control over the Community

Narrative of Alaska Native Communities