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Models of Community Development Practice

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Abstract: *We address two models developed in a research project that explored community development practice. We begin with a brief introduction of our research, continue with the presentation of the models, relate them to existing theory, and conclude with why the introduction of new models is justified.*

This paper represents a progression of our work of the past three years. We initiated this ongoing research effort in 1997 to explore what guides the work of community development practitioners. We began with a small sample in the southeastern United States, but have since had the opportunities to make our study international encompassing eight countries in five continents. Rather than formal theories, we learned about implicit practice-based theories formulated in the work community developers perform and the elements that influence their reflective practice. We have presented our research in a number of forums, including AERC, the Community Development Society of North America, the International Community Development Society in Scotland, and an international symposium in Botswana. The purpose of this paper is to present and test the models of reflective practice in community development we developed in the course of our research.

This study utilizes grounded theory, a research methodology that builds theory from practice. Grounded theory is a qualitative method of inquiry in which the researcher intends to generate or discover substantive theory, meaning theory that is rooted in practical situations and that provides explanations of key social processes grounded in empirical data (Creswell, 1998). Data are collected primarily through interviews, supplemented by fieldwork. Typically 20-30 people are interviewed. The constant comparative model of data analysis is used, and the focus is on social processes. Grounded theory results in an analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation or practice setting. It describes a plausible relationship among concepts and sets of concepts (Merriam, 1998). In this type of study, approximately 35 interviews are usually conducted and data sources other than interviews are utilized. We have collected data via inter-

views, site visits and observations, and photographs and documents with 33 practitioners in 5 countries.

We began with interviews of 10 practitioners in the southeastern United States and the findings indicated that they were aware of the complex nature of communities, valued inclusiveness and collaboration processes to involve people, and were conscious of the need to incorporate indigenous, local knowledge of community residents in action planning and following up on results (Moore & Hill, 1998). We reported about the addition of 13 community workers in Australia and another group from the United States and Canada making a total of 23 interviews (Hill & Moore, 1999a). These results included practitioner support for valuing local knowledge, leveraging community resources, and providing space for people to be involved and voice their opinions about issues. Strategies and techniques used by practitioners for these activities included using local stories and residents' visions of the future as a method to make plans for change in communities. In addition, practitioners acknowledged using culturally relevant mental images and metaphors as tools for communicating with peers and community members. In 1998, we collected 10 additional practitioner interviews from Botswana, Malaysia, and Canada which were added to the existing 23, making a total of thirty-three interviews. We reported these analyses and findings at the International Association for Community Development conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland (Hill & Moore, 1999a). Findings which emerged were related to the power of government interventions and the unintended consequences of government support for community change. Further, practitioners were concerned about top-down expert dictates for change, loss of local control in decision making, and the need to involve residents of different backgrounds, races, and cultures in community devel-

opment activities. Based on our research, we have conceived two models of community development practice which will be described below.

In 1999, additional data were collected in Taiwan and Scotland which are being analyzed for inclusion in this ongoing research. Additional manuscripts are under development concerning diversity in community development practice (Moore & Hill, submitted) and the influence of cultures regarding community worker perceptions and actions (Hill & Moore, submitted). Despite the obvious language, cultural, and location differences there are many basic community organization and development issues of agreement expressed by community practitioners.

The Models

In this section, we describe the two models that have resulted from our research. They are presented separately, but are interrelated. Figure 1 represents a model of reflection in community development practice and can be found on the last page of this paper. Elements of the proposed model are:

- *Implicit practice-based theory.* In the course of doing their work, practitioners tended to develop personalized and practice-based theories based on their field experiences. They formulated strategies and theories about community development work to inform their practice. We have labelled them implicit because they tended to become something that wasn't articulated but influenced their actions.
- *Beliefs about community.* Practitioners must assess how capable a community is to chart its own course and how to assist them. Community development practitioners struggle with the appropriate blend of local knowledge, involvement of outside experts, accepting directions from local leaders, and when to call upon their own knowledge in community development activities. They are challenged about when and how to bring in outside knowledge such as new government regulations or activities in neighboring communities.
- *Talking/working together/observing.* Practitioners learn by working with each other and community residents, working together on projects, visiting other communities, and soliciting ideas and suggestions from their peers.
- *Literature-Based Theories.* Our participants turned out to read widely in business, environmental, policy studies, law, psychology, agriculture, and adult education. A synthesis of multiple theories is their

guide rather than a single theory derived from community development literature.

- *Field Experience and Practice.* This is the central component in reflective practice. It is through experience and ongoing practice, in which a practitioner attempts to assist communities, that a practitioner reflects on his/her work and formulates his/her implicit practice-based theories.

While each element of the model is described separately, they do not exist in isolation. Practitioners described to us that they are guided by a synthesis of these elements to address needs in the community. What links the different elements is constant reflection. The people we interviewed seemed to be continually assessing the effectiveness of their work in solving community problems and were aware of their capacity to do harm and good.

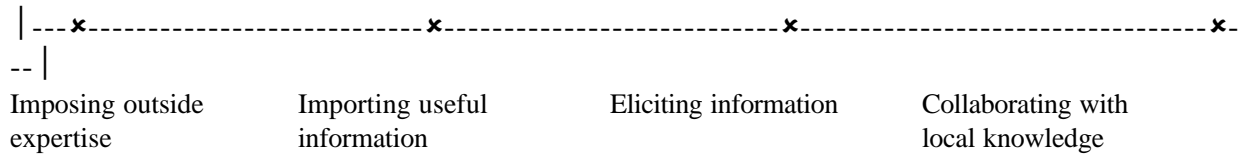
Each of the elements is represented by a circle and curved arrows illustrate dynamic interactions between the elements of the model. We used the term reflection, illustrated by the larger circle in which the model exists, to capture the many activities, ideas, and thoughts practitioners had about community development. In earlier discussions, we vacillated between whether practitioners' theories or field experiences ought to be placed in the central of the model. Since our research focus is on theories developed and used in daily work in community development and our research indicated it was the element of central importance to practitioners, we decided to make it the focus of our model.

Closely related to *beliefs about community* in Figure 1, Figure 2 represents the idea that practitioners have the ability to work back and forth along a continuum of practice ranging from practitioners collaborating with local knowledge to imposing outside expertise, depending on the situation. We have specified points along the continuum: 1) imposing expert knowledge, 2) importing useful information, 3) eliciting knowledge, and 4) collaborating with local knowledge. These points are not designated to suggest that these are the only choices a practitioner may make. A practitioner may alter his/her position as circumstances and needs change. In North America, community development practitioners tend to favor a bottoms-up approach, collaborating with local knowledge. However many factors intervene in other countries including lack of technology and resources, needs of indigenous people, lack of education, and widespread poverty. We found that many practitioners in countries such as Malaysia and Botswana lean toward supporting local knowledge but sometimes find it nec-

essary to impose outside expertise. They are making the best choices given the resources available, the people, and the context and appear to be deliberate in their

choices in approaching the introduction of outside expertise to a community.

Figure 2: Situational Continuum



The situational continuum describes a major decision community development practitioners make when faced with a particular set of circumstances and participants. These decisions are heavily influenced by the elements described in Figure 1: implicit practice-based theories, field experience, beliefs about community, current literature, and their communications with other practitioners. Choosing whether to approach a project by imposing outside expertise, by working exclusively with local knowledge, or any position in between the endpoints of the continuum is a crucial decision that sets the tone for a practitioner's involvement with their community.

Relationship to Existing Literature

Our research about what guides community development practice has been influenced by several theories relating to reflective practice. Concepts such as double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bright, 1996), reflective practice (Boud & Walker, 1990), reflective thought and action (Barnett, 1989), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) are relevant to our research. Schön (1983) suggests that many practitioners engage in reflective practice, and that they may develop theories-in-use that are based in knowledge that is used daily to make judgements about what actions to take in a particular context and situation. Reflective practice "is an active, proactive, reactive and action-based process defining a set of skills concerned with understanding and dealing with real, complex, and difficult situations" (Bright, 1996, p. 167). For example, Wellington and Austin's (1996) model suggests that professional efforts can be both domesticating and liberating, depending on the value and belief systems of the professional. This does bear some relationship to our situational continuum but seems to lack the dynamic quality we propose. Boud & Walker (1990) offer a framework of reflective practice that relates preparation, experience, and reflec-

tive processes about how professional conduct their work. Their inclusion of the social milieu elegantly captures the ideas we have represented by *talking, working together, and observing*.

Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning views learning as a fundamentally social phenomenon with individuals talking about meaning, identify, practice, and community. The elements of his model are meaning, practice, community, and identity with learning as the central component. Wenger refers to the various items being as deeply interconnected. It does not seem very important which element occupies the center space. This certainly appears to resonate with our model and we have the same opinion that the elements can be interchanged. Wenger elaborates on the concept of communities of practice, which he suggests are an integral part of daily life and include our family and work life, schooling, and recreational activities. In a profession such as community development, ways of practice develop in community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise (p. 45). Through our research, we began to perceive that practitioners function as more than a collection of individuals, but rather that there were relationships between groups of practitioners. We suggest that the profession of community development also functions as a community of practice through its associations and conferences.

Conclusions

Several models of reflective practice exist in the literature. However, to date the practice of community development has not been explored from this perspective, and neither have these previous studies been conducted on an international basis. While the models of reflective practice existing in the literature are informative, we found them inadequate for explaining the complexities of what guides community development practitioners in

their work. Several factors differentiate the work of community development from other professions: 1) the diversity of their work, 2) its location in the community, 3) practitioners travel to the communities they work with but are usually not members, and 4) the situations they work with are complex involving decision making, problem solving, and interacting with many people.

Given that models of reflective practice exist already, it must be asked why we would propose a new one. Since the model in Figure 1 is based in our research with community development practitioners in several countries, one reason for the proposal is that the model we propose is specific to community development, and we hope that practitioners may find it useful in considering their work and to teach the profession to newcomers. A second reason is that we present several elements that influence reflective practice. The central element is field experience and practice, because it is in being confronted with new situations that reflection may intensify. All four elements on the periphery of the circle in Figure 1 influence the way people approach their field work and practice and it in turns influences them. What ties the all five elements together is reflection on practice, and we believe there is almost a continual interchange between the various elements. Practitioners continually refine their understanding of the literature, beliefs about community, what they learn from conversations with others, and eventually their own implicit theories. They approach new projects and situations with values and beliefs based on their history of field experience and the other elements identified in the model. The situation in turn influences their implicit practice-based theories.

It is possible that the models we propose may be applicable to other professions, although this idea is not based on any evidence and is speculative at this point. In Figure 2: Situational Continuum of Community Development Practice, it seems reasonable that other professions may make similar choices regarding their actions in particular circumstances. In Figure 1: Community Developers Thinking About Practice, the element currently named *beliefs about community* could be renamed *beliefs about profession* or perhaps *beliefs about context*. Further research with occupations other than community development may serve to further refine the models. For example, a similar study conducted with adult education practitioners or some of the medical professions would provide interesting information.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPERS

Thinking About Practice

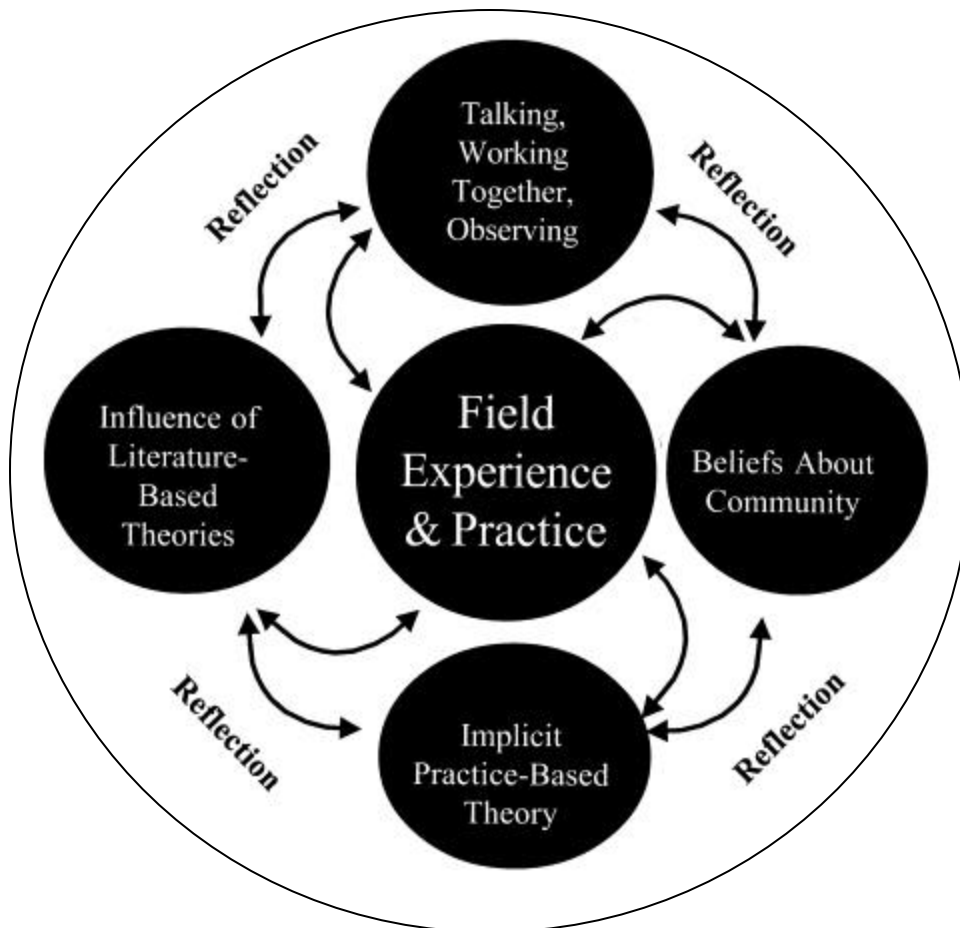


Figure 1