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Metaphors in Practice: Theories-in-Use Among Diverse Community Development Practitioners

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Abstract: Findings from this grounded theory research indicate that community development practitioners in both North America and Australia create similar working theories based on their experience in communities.

This research expands our previous work (Moore & Hill, 1998) regarding theories-in-use among community development practitioners. Our initial findings were based on a group of adult education and community development practitioners in a single geographic area, most of whom were employed by the same southeastern university. The current research increases the number and location of research participants. We continue our interest in the implicit theories that guide practice, diversifying the research pool introduces both culture and context to the research.

Purpose Statement

Our initial research began as we reflected and discussed our reactions to an observation by an Australian colleague that community development practitioners in North America are not as prone to developing formal models and theories about their work as others in the international community of scholars. Instead of confirming this comment, our 1998 research indicated that "rather than failing to have a theoretical basis for their work, the people we interviewed utilized a sophisticated blend of theory, integrating literature from many disciplines with extensive experience working with communities" (Moore & Hill, 1998, p. 231).

Our current research seeks to ascertain if there are unifying concepts that hold true across different cultures and contexts. Using a grounded theory methodology, we will analyze our larger pool of interviews with the following purposes:

   1. To better understand what informs the actions of practitioners--not only what they do, but why

   2. To understand how culture and context affect theories-in-use and practice.

Whereas previously we relied heavily on the literature of reflective practice (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Bright; 1996; Schön, 1983, 1991), our current emphasis on culture and context require an expanded theoretical base. Hinds, Chaves, & Cypess (1992) indicate that all human action is context dependent and that a knowledge of context is required to adequately perceive meaning. Chaiklin (1993) observes that "scientific understanding of individuals engaged in a practice must

include some analysis of the sociohistorical context in which the practice developed and proceeds" (p. 378). Part of the social context may be what is referred to in the literature as communities of practice (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1988; Wenger, 1998). Appropriate use of concepts is a "function of culture and the activities in which the concept has been developed and used" (p. 7). Practitioners are connected by socially constructed webs of belief, in essence functioning as a culture. This professional culture affects the way practitioners perceive and interact with the world. Learning professional practice is thus a process of enculturation.

The actions of community developers are designed to assist adults to reflect, analyze, make decisions, and eventually implement action plans and strategies to solve problems existing in their communities (Vella, 1994). These can range anywhere from solving local economic problems and inviting environmentally appropriate industries to their region. In many cases, practitioners appear to be operating from implicit theories. Bartunek and Louis (1996) indicate that practitioners are guided by their own theories that address the interactions among small groups of people and the consequences of actions. Their "implicit or local theories are sets of heuristically developed rules of practice people use to make sense of the situations they commonly encounter, to weigh action alternatives, and to account for environmental exigencies they observe and experience" (p. 5). Bartunek and Louis point out that academics' theories about practice tend to differ from those of practitioners, and further that academic theories tend to have little impact on practice. This study will help community development practitioners to articulate their theories in actions and serve to document and disseminate these theories thus contributing to both the practice and literature of adult learning and community development.

Research Design

This research includes interviews with community developers from three locations. Interviews were conducted with ten individuals primarily employed by a southeastern university in the United States during the fall and winter of 1997. In addition to the initial pool of research participants, we have conducted additional interviews with practitioners from other North American locations as well as Australia. Moore was invited to be a keynote speaker at an international community development conference held in Tasmania, Australia in June of 1998. While there, he was able to interview six community developers in Tasmania and one in Melbourne. Interviews were also conducted or scheduled at the July,1998 Community Development Society Conference. Three face-to-face interviews were conducted with community development practitioners from the midwest United States. Three additional interviews were scheduled and conducted using electronic mail with people from some western states and Canada. The e-mail interviews were completed at the end of August, 1998. The basic research question for all of the interviews continued to be "what guides your practice?" " What are the ideas, philosophy, orientations, or models that guide what you do when you are working in communities?" Data were collected via face-to-face interviews, visits to communities, and photographs taken of communities where participants worked or had conducted workshops and training programs for residents.

This expanded group of research participants was composed of 23 people, 16 from North America and 7 from Australia. Nine males and fourteen females were included. The age range extended from the early thirties to late sixties. All research participants had experience working

in the field of community development and adult education, working in both urban and rural communities. Eight had international experience. Ten had completed doctorate degrees, and two expect to complete their doctoral degrees in environmental protection in 1999. One has been awarded an honorary doctorate. Other people had completed bachelor or master's degrees and two are employed in community development while completing their undergraduate degrees in adult education.

Findings

Several themes emerged from our analysis of these data. Practitioners were able to be reflective about what guides their practice. Valuing local knowledge and leveraging resources were important for practitioners as they went about their community work. Providing space for people to be involved and heard were basic issues in this theme. Using stories and visions about the community was a technique for assisting community members to articulate their knowledge of the community and their visions for the future. Mental images or metaphors were used by community development practitioners as a quick way of communicating with peers and community members.

Reflecting About Practice. Community developers talked about assisting groups to see the big picture and how their issues fit into a larger system. Sometimes groups need assistance in analyzing their situation and reframing the situation with new information. The Principles of Good Practice, developed and published by the Community Development Society, was cited by one of the research participants as his guide for practice. One practitioner indicated that an ethic of professional integrity guides her practice. Being careful not to use inappropriate theories or models is what guides other community developers.

> There is no single theory that can explain communities because there are too many different groups and goals and conflicts.

> Practice is guided by fragments of several theories or models; there may be unifying themes but there is not yet a single theory that explains environmental protection.

The research literature in adult education and community development speaks about reflective practice (Argyris & Schön 1974), describing how professionals are critically aware of practicing their craft or speciality. Community developers in both North America and Australia pointed out their involvement in critical thinking, reframing situations, discussing their views and opinions with other practitioners, and examining the link between theory and practice. One person expressed the need for taking time to listen, learn, question, share, discuss and be immersed in the community. This same person pointed out the need to stop and think about what works and tried to explain why some methods or strategies were used in communities. Another participant pointed out that she was getting better at her practice as she became more mature and had more experience. In the same vein she noted that she was more thoughtful and more reflective about her practice. Additional comments related to thinking about ideas and actions that could be used in community work.

So you start to think!

> *But I'm not happy to feel good about what I'm doing, I want to actually see the results in what I'm doing.*
>
> *Everything is not grounded in theory; we do a lot of things based upon experience. Experience is a guide. Too much theory is not good just the same as too much experience; we need a blend of theory and experience.*

Local Knowledge, Creating Voice and Fostering Access to Resources. Ideas expressed by community developers could be grouped in the following categories 1) participation in community activities, 2) role of women in communities, 3) local control over issues and problems, 4) power relationships within the community, and 5) the value of local knowledge. Practitioners in Australia emphasized listening to and learning from community members. Similarly in North America, research participants recognized the importance of local knowledge for problem-solving. Additionally, all research participants suggested that people can be community resources, that experts coming into the community can also be important resources and that there are many ways people, experts, and community developers work with each other on issues, problems, and concerns. Community developers talked about participation in communities needing to be inclusive and involving diverse groups of people in decision making.

> The whole community, no matter what camp they are in, still manage to come together . . . they just have a passion about this place. There was such a diverse community; there was everything from what we call "ferrels" who are the really alternative or bush people to people who lived in the town . . . from the pioneer families and newly established businesses who were quite well to do, and everything in between.

Participants recognized that local people can be helped to voice their knowledge and when this information is shared it informs and empowers the group to work on community projects. Individuals working in teams gained confidence in their shared understanding and knowledge of the local situation. People appreciate that they are learning from each other, learning about local situations, learning about local culture, and they begin to value the knowledge that comes from themselves and the community. One participant talked about a group of women who had produced photo novels to express their concern about pesticides, noise, and respiratory problems in their farming community

> It was not only the knowledge, I think it was a lot of the self esteem that they got from participating and creating something very creative, untapped resources out there and unfortunately many people think that information must come from top down and I totally disagree with that.

However, it was also noted by some community developers that they had an obligation to inform, educate, and make locals aware of situations in the community.

> We need to educate our clients; we have an obligation to inform the client of options and problems, if any, as they work on project/program activities.

Shared knowledge of locals is a community resource. People can act as resources and have skills that can benefit the community if this information is acknowledged, shared, and used for decision making. Resources also can include access to opportunities and unrealized potentials for the community.

> You're entitled to service, let's actually give you the resources . . . so you can access the resources that the rest of the community operates on . . . so you don't feel stigmatized . . .

Community networks and structures for sharing local knowledge and expertise are what connects different individuals, groups, organizations, and neighborhoods to a common theme or goal.

> Good community development stuff would be to get people first up to experience something, get them to reflect on it, get them to use it again somewhere, get them to show somebody else about it, and then it would become meaningful.

Social networks provide ways for locals to become informed about community needs, share information about their interests and expectations, seek knowledge and expertise locally and from experts outside the community, and they might even create an organization or structure to help them manage this activity.

Community developers reported that their work was about identifying, organizing, creating, and promoting voices from diverse locations in the community. Making sure that many voices were heard in the community was one way of cutting across cultural and socioeconomic lines and promoting communications. They were also engaged in helping people to understand that locals have a collective voice that is powerful and can be used to get things done in the community.

Stories and Vision for the Community. Community developers talked about using stories, the telling and the listening, as a tool to elicit the sharing of ideas and learning from others. Although the mediums used to stimulate story telling such as writing, drawing, plays, photos, and discussion may differ, there seemed to be a lot of similarities in the way story telling was described in the North American and Australian interviews. Telling and listening to stories about the community focused on the past, present, and future. Needs were identified in the past and present stories and change or impact seemed to be illustrated in the stories about the future. Energy and passion about community activities was evident in the local people's expressions of their hopes and fears for community change.

Locals have stories about their community that illustrates their values and visions for the future. Community plays, photo novels, articles, journals, art, and culture are creative ways used to share ideas about their town, village, or neighborhood. Other creative activities with stories included drawing mental models and doing mind mapping to get people involved in using visuals and then talking about these illustrations to generate ideas about community development potentials.

> *What we do with story telling is to get people to write down ideas*
> *and to capture their thoughts on paper and with visuals and to get*
> *them talking about what happened.*

When people talk about their lives, their stories, and their communities, the research participants also become energized. They had energy and passion about what they saw being described by locals. Some of this energy and passion is about creating change in the community or neighborhood.

> *Communities change by people understanding what their image is*
> *now and how it can be changed in the future.*

Energy and passion provide the drive or motivation and also suggest the potential for something to change. Community developers talked about using a variety of approaches, strategies, and techniques to get people involved. They asked people to tell stories while others listened and discussed what they heard. Local knowledge and creativity can be focused on community issues with positive results.

Mental Images. Because we noted the pervasive use of metaphors in our first paper (Moore and Hill, 1998), we were attentive to the use of metaphors in other locations and cultures in subsequent data collection. When we began this analysis, metaphors were not so easily identified, perhaps because of our inability to recognize them outside of our own cultural background. Yet metaphors were used by some of the community developers in all three locations to quickly describe activities and processes.

In North America, communities are sometimes described as having ugly babies meaning that everyone might see that the baby is ugly but no one would tell the parents and this is what some communities experience. For example, residents might pass by the exposed sewer but no one does anything to correct the problem. Another expression used refers to a dog sled team meaning that if you are not the lead dog in a dog-sled team the view is always the same. Communities need leaders to emerge that have different views and visions and have the skill to point these possibilities out to others. Art of the long view is a metaphor based on a book title (Schwartz, 1991) that means examining the situation over a period of time, differentiating it from the limited perspective of a short-term approach. At the end of the day was used by some of the practitioners in Australia. It is a results-oriented phrase intended to mean that when the project is done practitioners examine what has been accomplished or changed. Pick the eyes out of what you see around you may mean taking the time to critically reflect on what you observe. All of these metaphors stimulate mental images for people. These are short hand ways of communicating that are very effective in a single group or culture. There is the potential, however, for confusion or

inappropriate mental images to emerge if individuals are not from the same culture or sub-culture. Practitioners seem to be aware of the potential for confusion when using metaphors with community groups and colleagues. In our analysis, we realized that metaphors can cause confusion both intra-culturally and cross-culturally.

Implications for Community Development Practice

Our findings support the idea that community development practitioners create theories based on their experience in practice. These theories and practices are based on understanding who the locals are, recognizing that they have knowledge about the situation, and that this knowledge can be evoked by providing opportunities for story telling and discussion. People together can determine if their shared knowledge is adequate to solve problems in their community or if they need to involve outside expertise and resources. Plans of actions and sometimes organizing structures can be created for addressing local needs and combating persistent issues in the community. This approach reinforces the idea of local control where local knowledge is central. This is not a linear approach and in fact, seems to parallel double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

We could not disentangle culture from context from the interviews we conducted. We analyzed each group in our study separately in order to identify cultural differences that could affect community development practice. What made it difficult to accomplish this was the fact that people we interviewed were working with different sub-cultures within their own nation. From our analysis, it appeared that the issue of cultural differences seemed less significant than the needs identified in the local context.

We also speculate that community development practitioners participate in a shared community of practice within their profession. One of the ways this might function is through professional organizations such as the Community Development Society, which facilitates sharing and dialogue among members that crosses national boundaries. In fact, our results parallel an international listserv discussion of community values in practice sponsored by this organization. In this forum, Cornelia Flora (personal communication, November 19, 1998) describes the results of her research exploring what communities value as outcomes. Her findings include 1) increased use of the knowledge, skills, and abilities of local people, 2) strengthened relationships and communication, and 3) improved community initiatives including shared vision.

What we did learn from our study was that a similar process of working with communities is utilized by the practitioners we interviewed in Australia and North America, and the importance of context was made more visible. The solutions created by the process described above seem to be tailored to a specific situation or context (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). There did not appear to be differences in the processes used by community development practitioners, but solutions created by them in concert with community members were highly specific to the needs and realities of a local community.

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