

Strategies for Building Ecologically Aware and Active Communities: Diverse Discussion Groups

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ABSTRACT Communities have rich networks of social relationships if and when they are flourishing economically and politically. In hard times, however, the various groupings within a community may splinter and fragment, resulting in little communication, and few relationships. Television has undoubtedly contributed to this breakdown in many communities, but so too do declines in the economy, divisive political or social issues, and natural or man made disasters. In such difficult situations, many individuals are stressed, and as a result, it may be possible for social change agents to intervene, and set up new ways to establish and develop meaningful relationships for significant numbers of participants. Particularly for those who are severely stressed, options to change are often sought. The use of diverse discussion groups as one means offers a community wide method of enhancing human relationships to enable members to better understand and cope with or manage problematic issues. Practitioners from several disciplines may use ecological principles to approach communities and intervene through use of “diverse discussion groups.”

INTRODUCTION

As we move deeper into the Third Millennium, the problems faced by people around the world appear to be increasing in frequency, size, intensity, and speed of occurrence. Individual action to deal with complex emerging issues seems futile, given the scope and seriousness of the problems. Only collective action, directed squarely at the most vital issues, will have any chance of leading humankind to achieve positive outcomes. Individual acts, mass escapism, sensation seeking, ignoring, denying, and random group actions appear wasteful or even destructive, rather than helpful. Mankind either faces up to the central issues of our current situation or as many doomsayers predict, succumbs in a massive die-off (Hanson, <http://dieoff.org/>).

Two ideas may make a difference, especially if combined. These are 1) greater attention to documenting, analyzing and solving our common local problems and issues, and 2) setting up and conducting discussion groups of diverse local people to energize and focus them to understand the threats, and then enabling them to take appropriate actions. Both ideas need to be established at the level of workable sized human communities. A variety of examples follow, along with suggested approaches to begin solving our many crises and problems.

BACKGROUND

On international levels, competition by individuals, corporations and nation-states for survival and self-interest in obtaining shortterm materialist goals appears to have replaced any sense of shared purpose, common justice, joint endeavors, and collective longterm goals. Problems, such as overpopulation, global warming, altered weather patterns, pollution, famine, disease, warfare, shortages of energy in the form of oil and petrol in the not very distant future, issues of allocation of health and education, the gap between rich and poor, the grip of corporations and military powers over populations, and so on are growing. “Community” appears to have been lost while the numbers of people in turmoil and conflict have increased dramatically (Fisher et al., 2002). Indeed, 1 in every thirty-five people in the world is currently ‘running,’ that is, a migrant (BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/migration/html/migration_boom.stm). We seem to share only a sense that environmental and other crises will soon appear, leaving us but limited time in which to obtain our personal share of goods, material resources, rights, privilege and happiness. Reckoning time, though, is fast approaching. Given this situation, it is important to search for ways in which intervention in local

communities to increase awareness, identify possible solutions, and begin acting to improve conditions.

A CASE EXAMPLE

Alan Holmberg, anthropologist and some would say one of the fathers of applied anthropology, took charge of the running of a village in Highland Peru in the 1950's. This village, Vicos, was the locale for dozens of research studies and reports over the ensuing years. Holmberg himself, with support and involvement of Cornell University's Department of Anthropology and Peru's Institute for Indigenous Affairs, and the people of Vicos, set up a plan to intervene, to apply a number of ideas about making life better for the inhabitants, and then turn over the "ownership" of the village to the villagers themselves. The project was based on the assumption that social values (i.e., morality, respect, and skill) and economic worth needed to be developed together as well as through the regular consultation of locals with experts to increase the success of development programs and projects. The project used local models of association and community . . . to disseminate information and encourage changes that were designed to reduce socioeconomic inequality, foster democracy, and improve health among other goals" (<http://chapters.altamirapress.com/07/591/0759102120ch1.html>, accessed 3 September 2004).

Holmberg's example, which took ten years from start to the actual turn-over of control, has been both honored and vilified, but for many of his students, his work served as an inspiration. He believed that both insiders and outsiders could and should intervene in village settings or communities to assist the people of the place to make positive social and economic changes occur. Such changes, he felt, could be of benefit to the residents, and such actions were not only ethical, but imperative. In fact, to avoid acting would be a denial of involvement that was not ethical or moral.

Accordingly, Holmberg intervened according to his carefully thought out plans. He began by bringing genetically improved potatoes, then made and used fertilizers, set up trading networks, started a school, and did a variety of other simple but effective interventions. Life soon became richer and more positive for the people

of Vicos, at least for a time. As the tenth year approached, the people demanded and took over full leadership of their now empowered village.

Applying the Example

Inspired by Alan Holmberg's work, the author, armed with a background in the disciplines of anthropology, rehabilitation, and psychology, moved to a Southern US community with an enormous military base during the height of the Viet Nam War in 1967. As a researcher in the local mental health center, the author was able to view and then become involved with this community in crisis. The soldiers, on direct rotation back and forth from Viet Nam, played a huge role in this community, and brought extreme violence, heavy drug abuse, and difficult family situations (Gregory, 1998). The town had some extreme "self-interested" factions, and a variety of conflicting groups, such as black versus white, military versus civilian, rich versus poor, young versus old, male versus female, straight versus "hippie", and even occupational role differences, stratifying the community. Though there were numerous clubs, social groups, associations, interest groups, and so on, they reflected the many divisions apparent in the community, rather than providing a way for the people to get acquainted, communicate, and work together across the barriers and boundaries.

The community then, was highly stressed, factionalized, and without coherent or agreed upon leadership. To an outside observer, this community appeared to have broken apart. In the midst of that situation, the author initially focused on getting fully acquainted with as many of the factions as possible in the community. With others, he carefully studied and analyzed the situation, using disciplinary teachings from political science, psychology, anthropology, and half a dozen other disciplines. After figuring out at least some of what was taking place structurally and dynamically, the author and others at the center decided to act by setting up "mental health" discussion groups. The purpose of these groups was to enable people from all over the community to sit down and talk about their common interest in their community, then explore the ways and means by which they and their community could change so that all members would benefit.

Some groups were caught in the middle of

stressful situations to a greater extent than others: teachers, police officers, social and health workers, and other helping agency personnel. These people and the organizations in which they worked, made recruitment of potential participants for an innovative project easy. The initial task involved selecting and training group discussion leaders. Setting up discussion groups followed at neutral locations, to be run by these bright, energetic and well educated concerned citizens who volunteered to be leaders. The plan was to cover a series of mental health topics, including stress, social change, drugs and alcohol use or abuse, violence and alternatives, communication patterns, the need for action on a community wide basis, and so on. The mix of police, teachers, agency personnel included blacks and whites, younger and older, richer and poorer, and in effect, a cross-section of this divided community. Establishing a common ground in the group discussions was remarkably simple, for it was quickly obvious that each person wanted a better community. The participants, chosen from a wide variety of backgrounds and roles, began to get acquainted personally, by sharing their own perspective, analyzing the local situation as they saw it, and then searching for common ground among the other participants.

The most exciting thing about this project was that 7 groups of about fifteen members took part simultaneously, with a series of 4 cycles run in two years. Thus nearly four hundred people took part, which meant that an impact could be produced even in a community of fifty thousand inhabitants. Working with individuals alone would not bring about change, whereas having at least some influence on four hundred people can create new communication patterns, deeper analysis of underlying situations, better understanding of community, and even action plans. That people from such important arenas as the police, the education system, and the various agencies that dealt daily with health, welfare, and so on was remarkable. In addition, some carefully chosen visitors were invited to one or two sessions of the groups, including people at the apex of the political hierarchy as well as from the depths of the streets and the street scenes. These invited persons typically attended one or two sessions, enough to assure that each of the discussion groups had a visitor or two from a very different background. In the

case of street people, young people doing drugs, and even some prisoners serving time in prison but who volunteered to and were enabled to address the groups, at least two or three took part to avoid any threat to individuals. During the visits, these political leaders or at the opposite extreme, street people, expressed their ideas, shared their insights and feelings, and answered questions. Those in the middle, the regulars, listened, and thereby began to round out their notions of what "community" really meant (Gregory, 1972).

As a result, some changes were evident, wider networks of friends and colleagues were created, and greater common ground was evident too. A greater appreciation for those who were different from oneself and from one's own usual background began to occur. In the words of one conservative participant, "my gosh, that long haired "hippie" radical is also a member of our community and he cares about what happens in this community!" They began to talk together about common issues.

Another example

A few years later, another Southern community was being stressed with sudden and dramatic influx of heroin. A survey in the schools revealed a significant number of young people were exposed to and using various drugs. Another survey, using police records, service delivery program records, and a physician's records found addresses for at least two hundred heroin users. Using the nationally accepted calculation, that is, for each person found about 5 persons are likely to be using, the estimate was that one thousand persons were using heroin in the community. Given a population of seventy thousand, that meant that about 1 in seventy persons was using heroin, a highly significant number. The teachers, police, agency personnel, and some parents were extremely stressed as a result of what was happening in this community.

An anti-drug community based program was formed during this time. The Board of Directors included members from across the community, such as health personnel, police, the wife of a judge, business leaders, a researcher, religious leaders, and so on. A small paid staff, including the author, and a large number of volunteers were charged with developing programs and projects. Rather than offer lectures to assure people that

all would be taken care of in this community, no such messages were released. In fact, links to newspapers were made so that a series of articles addressed and outlined the problems and issues raised with rampant drug abuse. As a result, great interest emerged in doing something by many groups throughout the community. The problems could not be solved by relegating them to experts, rather the people themselves had to get organized and act.

A series of discussion groups were then set up, using relatively neutral locations. As with the preceding project, splits and gulfs between black and white, rich and poor, young and old, roles, various geographic sectors in the community, and so on, were many. Each group set up included a couple of police officers, several teachers, several people from various health, education, social and welfare agencies, and a sprinkling of others. Of importance, each group included whites and blacks, men and women, young and old, and people from various sectors of the community. Each group had a leader, typically a bright, well educated, flexible, local, professional person who was either already educated and/or trained in discussion group leadership. A special session was held for the leaders to prepare.

Running 7 groups simultaneously again for four cycles, the numbers of people included around fifteen per group, each group meeting for about ten times. The sessions were targeted to police, teachers and agency personnel, although some others especially interested were incorporated too. The teachers were able to receive credits towards their state certification requirements for additional studies, and the police received positive reports in their personnel files and publicity for police-community relationship efforts. Basic information and answers to concerns about drugs was included, but efforts were made to look deeper, that is, at underlying problems in the community (Gregory, 1974). These problems were found through a search and analysis of 1) the splits between different parts of the community, 2) the failure to communicate among people in different sectors, and 3) the lack of humanistic common values that were shared, and so on. By looking deeper at these relationships, some understanding of the "ecology of community" was achieved.

Diverse discussion groups proved fascinating for the participants in both of the above projects, each person had ample opportunity to present their own ideas about themselves, and their role

with their community, and about the problems faced by communities. Also, each then listened as others presented their ideas and commented on issues already opened up. The subsequent discussions enabled people to appreciate each other's point of view, to realize that each person was vitally concerned with the community, and this realization enabled all participants to gain a feeling of belonging, and a sense of mutual concern. They shared their ideas and understandings, and grew more thoughtful, and more reflective, as a result of the discussions.

Spontaneous action groups, sets of people who wanted to carry out specific actions to improve the community resulted from some of the discussions, so that continuation or transformation of the projects in some cases, followed.

Disciplinary Approaches

To replicate these ideas, three particular academic disciplines seem particularly appropriate for interventions. These approaches include applied anthropology, social rehabilitation and community psychology. Applied anthropology has led many traditional and academic anthropologists from their classrooms and textbooks and study back into communities, where they have sought to aid and assist the people with whom they live and observe (Ervin, 2000).

Rehabilitation has typically been conceived of as an approach to enable people with disabilities to return to work and life within a community setting. Regardless whether disability is due to accident or illness, disabilities often mean that a person is rejected, avoided, or otherwise ostracized from a community. Rehabilitation counseling emerged as a means to enable such individuals to gain or return to work, and thereby also gain self esteem and a sense of belonging to the network provided by the community. Unfortunately, rehabilitation was captured by the clinical or medical model approach, the bureaucratic state or government controlled interests, and then used as a means of individualization. The person with a disability was controlled through on-going financial benefits rather than mobilization, involvement in networks and links to social supports, and returned back into the community. Further, as clinical interests took over the profession and assured that clients were individualized, and treated, rather than brought together

to look at common interests, the entire ecological perspective was lost. Thus the social side of rehabilitation was avoided, and any efforts to create social change were effectively blocked (Stubbins, 1982; Stubbins and Albee, 1984; Scotch, 2002).

Psychology has traditionally been focused on individuals and their behavior, the study thereof, and to a limited extent, therapy with individuals who present themselves for treatment. Unwittingly, psychology often represents the status quo, and most psychologists are unaware of and unacquainted with sociology, political science, and even the sense of community. In brief, psychology like rehabilitation, became a clinical method, focusing only on sick individuals and refusing to look at community health and public issues, prevention, social action, social change or ecological approaches. Fortunately, there are exceptions, for some psychologists have branched off, stemming from the historic meeting at Swampscott, Massachusetts in 1964 that resulted in the formation of community psychology. Members of this field use ecological paradigms and approaches to understand community, and as well, seek to intervene in real life situations to effect social change with communities (Rappaport, 1977; Seidman and Rappaport, 2000).

Professionals from these three fields offer a great many skills, although some participants lack the larger vision or perspective of ecology, and especially human ecology. Fortunately, some people involved in the practice of applied anthropology, the disability rights and rehabilitation movements, and community psychology have understood the powerful ideas of ecological approaches, and as a result, they have taken on policy issues, social change activities, and indeed, a general social systems approach. For those who are sufficiently inspired, the possibilities of creating social change through use of diverse discussion groups seems unlimited, for there are many communities facing serious and urgent problems.

CONCLUSION

Social change within communities is not only possible, but is essential to facilitate a more positive future for all humankind. Requirements to create social change include astute understanding of individuals and groups, a vision of ecologically sound communities, skills in social

change and activism, and energy to get involved. Many of the existing structures and groups within communities support factionalism, and inhibit communication between those in different roles, from different sectors, of different ethnic group, and so on. One "social engineering" activity is to form discussion groups, in which community representatives and members participate freely in sharing ideas, listening to each other and to those who are dispossessed, and then as a result, acting together to create system-wide changes that benefit all the people of the community. Such social entrepreneurial activities may well promote awareness and action-oriented solutions to the pressing needs now apparent.

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