

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

Programme: Bachelor of Arts (Third Year)

Subject: Psychology

Paper Code: PSD 107

Paper Title: Community Psychology

Unit: Unit 1- Understanding the Field of Community Psychology

Module Name: Definition of Community Psychology – Part 2

Name of the Presenter: Sibyl Fernandes

Notes

Persons and Contexts

Persons and context play a very important role in community psychology. Shinn and Toohey (2003) coined the term context minimization error to denote ignoring or discounting the importance of contexts in an individual's life. Context refers to the encapsulating environments within which an individual lives (e.g., family, friendship network, peer group, neighborhood, workplace, school, religious or community organization, locality, cultural heritage and norms, gender roles, social and economic forces). Together, these make up the structural forces that shape the lives of individuals. Context minimization errors lead to psychological theories and research findings that are flawed or that hold true only in limited circumstances. These errors can also lead to therapy interventions or social programs that fail because they attempt to reform individuals without understanding or altering the contexts within which those individuals live.

A key concept of social psychology is the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977)—the tendency of observers watching an actor to overestimate the importance of the actor's individual characteristics and underestimate the importance of situational factors. When we see someone trip on a sidewalk, we often think “how awkward” or wonder if the person has been drinking. We seldom look to see if the sidewalk is flawed. Context minimization is similar but refers to contexts and forces that include those beyond the immediate situation. Cultural norms, economic necessities, neighborhood characteristics, and the psychological climate of a workplace are examples. Contexts influence our lives at least as much as individual characteristics do. This is not to say that personal

characteristics do not matter or that individuals are not responsible for their actions but to recognize the impacts of contexts. Community psychologists seek to understand people within the social contexts of their lives and to change contexts in order to promote quality of life for persons.

Community psychology is about the relationships of persons and contexts. These are not one-way streets. Contexts affect personal life, while persons, especially when acting together with others, influence and change contexts. Community psychology seeks to understand and to improve individual, community, and societal quality of life.

What Is Community Psychology? A Definition

Community psychology concerns the relationships of individuals with communities and societies. By integrating research with action, it seeks to understand and enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and societies.

Structural Perspectives and First-Order and Second-Order Change

First-order change alters, rearranges, or replaces the individual members of a group. This may resolve some aspects of the problem. However, in the long run, the same problems often recur with the new cast of characters, leading to the conclusion that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Attempting to resolve homelessness by counseling homeless individuals without addressing the supply of affordable housing represents first-order change. You may help that individual, but the social problem will persist because you have not addressed all the reasons that homelessness exists.

Try a thought experiment suggested by community psychologist Seymour Sarason (1972) to analyze the educational system. Criticisms of schools, at least in the United States, often focus blame on individuals or collections of individuals: incompetent teachers, unmotivated or unprepared students, or uncaring parents or administrators. Imagine changing every individual person in the school: firing all teachers and staff and hiring replacements, obtaining a new student population, and changing every individual from the school board to the classroom—yet leaving intact the structure of roles, expectations, and policies about how the school is to be run. How long do you think it will be before the same issues and criticisms return? Why? If you answer “not long,” you are seeing the limits of first-order change. It is sometimes enough, but often, it is not.

A group is not just a collection of individuals; it is also a set of relationships among them. Changing those relationships, especially changing shared goals, roles, rules, and power relationships, is second-order change. For example,

instead of preserving rigid lines between bosses who make decisions and workers who carry them out, second-order change may involve collaborative decision making. Instead of rigid lines of expertise between mental health professionals and patients, it could involve finding ways that persons with disorders may help each other in self-help groups. The point is not that specific interventions need to always be used but rather that the analysis of the problem takes into account these set of relationships and contexts as possible contributing sources of the problems.

Referred to:

Kloos, B., Hill, J. Thomas, E., Wandersman, A., Elias M.J. & Dalton J.H. (2012). *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities*, Wadsworth Cengage Learning.