

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

Programme: Bachelor of Arts

Subject: Psychology

Course Code: PSD 107

Course Title: Community Psychology

Unit: I Understanding the field of Community Psychology

Module Name: Ecological Levels of Analysis in Community Psychology

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Notes

Ecological Levels of Analysis in Community Psychology

As individuals, we live within webs of social relationships. Urie Bronfenbrenner originated a concept of levels of analysis (describing levels of social contexts) that is influential in developmental psychology and community psychology. Our discussion of ecological levels is partly based on Bronfenbrenner's approach, but our frame of reference is the community, not just the developing individual. Thus, we differ in some details from his approach. Historically, community psychology has used ecological levels as a way of clarifying the differing values, goals, and strategies for intervention associated with each level of analysis. In addition, this approach helps us focus on the interactions between systems.

Thinking in terms of ecological levels of analysis helps to clarify how a single event or problem has multiple causes. For example, factors that contribute to a child's problems in school may include forces at multiple levels. Powerful adults at school, locality, national, and global levels make policy decisions that affect the quality of education the child receives. Family members, friends, and teachers have a great impact, but even their thinking and values are influenced by the school system, locality, cultural, societal, and even global levels. Thinking in terms of ecological levels of analysis also helps to illustrate multiple answers to an important question for community psychology: What is a community? While originally tied to place or a locality, "community" has come to refer to sets of relationships among persons at many levels—whether tied to place or not.

Thus, a classroom, sorority, religious congregation, online community, or cultural group (e.g., the Mexican American community) may be considered a community. The most proximal, closest to the individual and involving the most face-to-face contact. The more distal systems, less immediate to the person yet having broad effects. Some of these systems overlap; for example, some organizations, such as small businesses or community groups, are so small that they have many of the psychosocial qualities of microsystems.

Bronfenbrenner described the webs of relationships surrounding the individual by using the metaphor of the Russian nesting doll. A nesting doll is egg-shaped and contains a succession of smaller dolls. When opened, each doll reveals a smaller doll inside. The nesting doll metaphor calls attention to how the smallest doll exists within layers of larger dolls—just as each individual exists within layers of contexts. Proximal systems are nested within broader, more distal systems. However, the nesting doll metaphor is incomplete, omitting the relationships among levels. Individuals, societies, and the levels between them are interdependent, and their contributions to behavior and social problems may overlap in different ways. Indeed, community psychology is based on that interdependence.

1. Individuals

Consider the individual person, nested within the other levels. The person chooses his or her relationships or environments to some extent and influences them in many ways; likewise, they influence the person. Each person is involved in systems at multiple ecological levels (e.g., family and friends, workplace, and neighborhood). Much research in community psychology concerns how individuals are interrelated with social contexts in their lives. For example, a special journal issue examined the human costs of underemployment.

Community psychologists and others in related fields have developed individually oriented preventive interventions to increase personal capacities to address problems in communities. These interventions have been documented to be effective in reducing such problems as difficulties in the social and academic development of children, adolescent behavior problems and juvenile delinquency, adult physical health and depression, HIV/AIDS, difficulties during family transitions such as parenting and divorce, and family violence. Many preventive approaches promote social emotional competence, skills for adapting to challenging contexts, and ecological transitions from one context to another, such as entering school or becoming a parent.

2. Microsystems

Microsystems are environments in which the person repeatedly engages in direct, personal interaction with others. They include families, classrooms, friendship networks, scout troops, athletic teams, musical groups, residence hall wings, and self-help groups. In microsystems, individuals form interpersonal relationships, assume social roles, and share activities. Microsystems are more than simply the sum of their individual members; they are social units with their own dynamics. For example, family therapists have long focused on how families function as systems beyond their individual members. Members have roles, differential power in making decisions, reactions to the actions of other members, etc. Microsystems can be important sources of support for their members and also sources of conflict and burdens. The concept of a setting is important in community psychology. In this psychological usage of the term, setting is not simply a physical place but is an enduring set of relationships among individuals that may be associated with one or several places. A chapter of a self-help group is a setting, even if its meeting place changes. Physical settings such as playgrounds, local parks, bars or coffee shops may provide meeting places for microsystems. The term setting is applied to microsystems and to larger organizations. Individuals in different contexts use microsystems in different ways. For example, one study at a predominantly European American university found that family support was more important during the first year of college for African American students, who had fewer peers on campus, while peer support was more important for European Americans, who had more peers available.

What are the most important microsystems in your life? Are these microsystems part of wider settings, such as a neighborhood, university, or business? Choose one microsystem. What resources does it provide for you? What challenges or obligations does it present? Name something that you would like to change about one of the microsystems in your life. Why?

3. Organizations

Organizations are larger than microsystems and have a formal structure: a title, mission, bylaws or policies, meeting or work times, supervisory relationships, and so on. Organizations studied by community psychologists include human service and health care settings, treatment programs, schools, workplaces, neighborhood associations, cooperative housing units, religious congregations, and community coalitions. These are important forms of community in that they

affect who people associate with, what resources are available to them, and how they define and identify themselves. Employed persons often introduce themselves by where they work. Organizations often consist of sets of smaller microsystems. Classes, activities, departments, staff, administrators, and boards make up a school or college. Departments, shifts, or work teams make up a factory or restaurant. Religious congregations have choirs, religious classes, and prayer groups. Large community organizations usually work through committees. However, organizations are not simply the sum of their parts; the dynamics of the whole organization, such as its organizational hierarchy and its informal “culture,” are important. In turn, organizations can be parts of larger social units. A local congregation may be part of a wider religious body or a retail store part of a chain. A neighborhood association offers a way for citizens to influence city government. The largest organizations (e.g., international corporations, political parties, or religious denominations) are macrosystems, which are discussed later. What are the most important organizations in your life? Do you participate in these organizations through smaller microsystems? Are these organizations part of larger localities or systems? Choose one organization. What resources does it provide for you? What challenges does it present? Name something that you would like to change about an organization in your life. Why?

4. Localities

Although the term community has meanings at many levels of analysis, one prominent meaning refers to geographic localities, including rural counties, small towns, urban neighborhoods, or entire cities. Localities usually have governments, local economies, media, systems of social, educational and health services, and other institutions that influence individual quality of life. Localities may be understood as sets of organizations or microsystems. Individuals participate in the life of their shared locality mainly through smaller groups. Even in small towns, individuals seldom influence the wider community unless they work alongside other citizens in an organization or microsystem. An association of neighborhood residents is an organization, while the entire neighborhood is a locality. That neighborhood may also host microsystems of teen friends, adults who meet for coffee, and parents and children who gather at a playground. However, a locality is not simply the sum of its citizens, microsystems, or community organizations. Its history, cultural traditions, and qualities as a whole community surround each of those levels.

Neighborhoods are important in individual lives, and community and developmental psychologists have begun to study them. A research review concluded that neighborhood conditions (in both urban and rural areas) are linked to children's health, personal distress, academic achievement, employment opportunities, behavior problems, delinquency, teenage childbearing, and being a victim of violence. Parenting strategies that are adaptive in safer neighborhoods differ from strategies adaptive in riskier neighborhoods. Among adults, neighborhoods affect fear of crime, anxiety, depression, and sense of community.

An example of the linkage between organizations and localities is the recent emergence of community coalitions, comprised of representatives of various community groups and organizations and formed to address wider community issues such as drug abuse or health concerns. What localities are important in your life? Describe a locality that you live in or have lived in. What are its strengths? Limitations? What would you change about it if you could? What organizations are important in this locality? How is it affected by larger social forces?

5. Macrosystems

Macrosystems are the largest level of analysis in our system. Macrosystems include societies, cultures, political parties, social movements, corporations, international labor unions, multiple levels of government, international institutions, broad economic and social forces, and belief systems. Community psychology's perspective ultimately needs to be global. Macrosystems exercise influence through policies and specific decisions, such as legislation and court decisions, and through promoting ideologies and social norms. Ideals of individual autonomy greatly influence U.S. culture and the discipline of psychology. Mass media communicate subtle forms of racial stereotyping and cultural expectations for thinness, especially for women. Macrosystems also form contexts within which the other levels function, such as the economic climate affecting businesses. But systems at other levels can influence macrosystems through social advocacy or through actions such as buying locally grown foods.

An important level of analysis that we include under macrosystems is the population. A population is defined by a broadly shared characteristic (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, income, religion, sexual orientation, or having a physical or mental disability). Populations can be the basis of a broad

form of community (e.g., the Jewish community, the gay community). However, not all individuals within a population will identify with it as a community.

Many studies in community psychology concern more than one level of analysis. For instance, a recent study of children in Head Start programs investigated neighborhood-, family-, and individual-level factors related to educational success. The researchers found that neighborhood-level factors (including the number of families of low or high socioeconomic status and the number of homes in which English was a second language) had significant direct effects on the cognition and behavior of children in Head Start. These direct neighborhood-level effects were not mediated by such family-level factors as family structure, income or ethnicity, and family processes (e.g., amount of social support available to parents, parents' involvement in their children's education). What this means, for example, is that living in a neighborhood marked by concentrated poverty had a significant negative effect on the cognitive and behavioral development on children, even if those children lived in a two-parent home with good income and parents who were highly involved in their education. The negative neighborhood-level effects were strong enough to overwhelm any positive effects the children received from their parents.

References

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