

COMMUNITY WORK AND SOCIAL-LEARNING THEORY

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Community workers draw on a broad range of social science theories to guide their practice. Few, however, have systematically examined social-learning theory for its relevance to community practice. In this article, the authors illustrate the usefulness of the theory in two case examples and suggest possible applications in other settings.

In developing basic principles of practice, social workers have applied concepts and theories from many social science disciplines. Caseworkers have drawn from neo-Freudian and behavioral psychology, group workers have borrowed from the psychology and sociology of small groups, and generic social workers have looked to organizational and systems theory in addition to casework and group work. But where do community workers—those engaged in community organization, community development, community planning, and social action—turn to guide and justify their decisions and actions? Community workers rely on a wide range of concepts and theories, including an understanding of organizational dynamics, the use of political and economic power, and the role of conflict in social change.

In the literature on community organization, principles of action and tentative schema for applying those principles have been developed by several writers.¹ Paradigms for practice have been generated that give the community organizer useful although general guides and techniques for practice under specified conditions. For instance, Brager and Specht proposed a practice schema based on Warren's suggested strategies for responding to conditions of dissension or consensus.²

Ross's pioneering work in community organization and Alinsky's "rules" never move beyond a set of working principles deduced from an aggregation of practice experiences. Some more recent work by Rothman and others, although more comprehensive and empirically grounded, still does not go beyond a careful articulation of current and accepted theories and methods of community organization and social planning.³

Relatively little attention has been given in the community organization literature to the role that social-learning theory can play in the development of practice principles.⁴ One notable exception was a 1967 article by Fellin, Rothman, and Meyer that delineated the implications of this approach for community organizing.⁵ Other

exceptions are the work of Holmberg and others in the Vicos project in Peru and Kunkel's writings, both of which represent successful applications of the behavioral perspective to strategies of macro-level change.⁶ In the area of management, more recent studies have expanded on the theoretical work of Cyert and March in applying the behavioral approach to small- and largescale organizations.⁷ Kazdin cited several applications of reinforcement techniques to social life.⁸ Some of the examples for improving self-government are mentioned later in this article.

In this article, the authors examine the principles of social-learning theory and their application to community practice. They present two diverse case examples to illustrate behavioral modeling in social action and the use of behavioral goals as criteria for evaluating outcomes of community intervention. Several other possible applications of social learning to community practice are also suggested. The aim is to stimulate community organizers to reevaluate their practice in terms of these and other relevant social-learning principles.

Social-learning theory proposes in part that behavior can be altered by rearranging selected elements in the social environment. As Kunkel put it: "One of the most important propositions of the behavioral perspective . . . is that behavior is replicated when contingencies remain the same, and behavior is changed when contingencies are altered."⁹ The authors believe that heightened awareness of this proposition is essential for a comprehensive view of the social action field in which community change-agents operate.

In social-learning theory, "man is neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted helplessly by environmental influences."¹⁰ Instead there is a reciprocal relationship between behavior and the conditions that control it. The theory integrates prior cues, cognitions, behavior, and reinforcing and punishing consequences—the critical variables on which behavior is contingent. In this view, the environment is a behavioral creation that acts on the behavior of the actor who created it.

To understand behavior, then, social-learning theory looks to (1) environmental cues that precede a particular response, (2) mediational processes (cognitions that mediate the stimuli), (3) the behavior itself, and (4) rewarding or punishing (reinforcing) consequences that follow.

There is also feedback from reinforcing consequences to prior stimuli and mediational processes for future behavior. The most salient contingencies of behavior, most simply stated, are rewards and punishments.

The following two sections of this article contain two illustrative applications of the theory in relation to modeling in social action and the use of behavioral goals for evaluating interventions. Two cases are described. The first, from an urban setting, shows modeling by an organizer-leadership group to be crucial in the life of a neighborhood coalition. The second, from rural practice, indicates the value of using sustained behavioral changes as a criterion for making assessments on outreach efforts by community health workers.

Behavioral Modeling

Social learning occurs through direct experience, symbolic information (language), and observation. Although most new behavior is acquired by observing models, performance of what has been learned does not occur without reinforcing incentives. Observation without performance leads to acquisition of the modeled behavior in cognitive, representational forms (images or language symbols). Stimuli are encoded into memory and they function as mediators for later responses. In addition to promoting new behavior, exposure to models may inhibit or encourage previously learned responses. Inhibitions are strengthened or weakened by vicarious experience of a model's punishments or rewards. That is, if one sees modeled behavior that is ordinarily disapproved go unpunished, it has the same effect as if one observes the model receiving rewards for that behavior.

The effect of modeling is shown in the following case example of selected incidents in the history of a social action coalition formed in the late 1960s: The coalition was centered in a low-income neighborhood with a population of about 50,000 in a major West Coast metropolitan area. Its membership comprised large, established public and private agencies and a number of smaller, more militant organizations. The organizers and a small core of militant leaders had far different goals from representatives of established agencies. From the beginning, and intensifying throughout, there was internal conflict over the role of the organization—whether it should merely support member organizations or operate as a strong, independent federation. The latter opinion, preferred by the organizers and militants, was opposed by the established agencies because it would allow the coalition to compete with them for Model Cities funds and other resources.

At the coalition's third annual convention, about 100 of the 1,200 delegates walked out because they opposed the slate of candidates put up by the organizer-militant leadership faction. The faction's nominee for president (the incumbent) had already served two terms; a third term would have required a change in the bylaws.

Competition between the incumbent candidate and the main opposition candidate—the head of a large member-agency—was a clear manifestation of the conflict over the ongoing issue of whether the coalition should remain loose or become a centralized federation. The incumbent president named himself as chairperson of the bylaws committee, which then recommended that he be allowed to run for a third term. Many delegates considered this decision as “a glaring affront to democratic procedures.”¹¹ In a close vote, the convention accepted the committee's recommendation, but the incident marked the hardening of factionalism in the coalition.

At the fifth convention, the two feuding groups accused each other of creating a large number of “paper organizations” to gain delegates. Many resolutions were passed, and the presidential candidate of the established-agency faction was elected, the remaining offices being split about evenly between the two groups. However, after the convention, the coalition was deeply divided, with control shifting back and forth between the factions. This situation peaked at a post-convention meeting of the council of delegates when open warfare erupted. The larger, newly strengthened established-agency faction took control of the organization simply by subverting constitutional procedures and bylaws. That summer, the organizer-militant leaders and their allies among the leadership withdrew from the coalition.

This case illustrates how inadvertent modeling may boomerang and have a destructive effect. Although most leaders and organizers recognize their power to influence others by modeling, few give attention to aspects of their behavior that, if imitated, undermine their objectives. For example, at the third convention of the coalition, the organizer-militant leadership faction managed to maintain control by bending if not actually subverting the democratic process, thereby inadvertently modeling a destructive approach to resolving factional differences. Members of the established-agency faction could hardly avoid observing the behavior of their opponents under conditions of conflict and crisis, nor could they fail to see the consequences of that behavior. The reward for violating the democratic ethos was continued control; there was no punishment.

This observational learning found expression some two years later under similar stimulus conditions and potential rewards—intense competition for control and direction of the coalition. When the balance of power shifted to them, the established agencies anticipated the reward of achieving permanent control and performed the behavior earlier learned by observing their opponents at the third convention: they subverted constitutional procedures.

The foregoing case was a realistic example of the negative effects of inadvertent modeling. It illustrated an important concept for practitioners. That is, not only is positive behavior observed and imitated, but negative

behavior—inadvertently modeled—is also a source of learning for allies and for adversaries. It may also be assumed that early modeling of negotiation behaviors in a coalition, especially during periods of conflict and crisis, may lead to practices that forestall destructive exchanges.

Behavioral Evaluation

Community development programs have been an integral part of the overall development plans of nations throughout the world. Particularly in the vast and heavily populated rural areas of less-developed countries, locality based community intervention has been a main link between villages and public programs in all sectors of development. In India, especially in the agricultural and health sectors, community development has shaped both the organizational infrastructure—mainly the development block (the administrative unit of one hundred to two hundred villages)—and the intervention strategies (identifying “felt needs,” fostering “self-help,” developing indigenous leaders, and so forth) that have guided community workers at the village level.

Evaluation of various block and village programs has typically involved looking at whether task or instrumental goals (such as legislation and physical projects) have been accomplished or whether intangible process goals (for example, democratic decision-making and responsible budgeting) have been met. Thus, in assessing the success of a village-level agency of change, several task-oriented questions may be asked: Did literacy rates improve? Was the community center built? Was a measure vetoed by the mayor? Were all children under 12 years old in a target neighborhood immunized? Or questions related to process objectives may be asked: Did the overall quality of participation in community projects improve from the previous year? Was budgeting more systematic and thoughtful than before? Has identification and development of indigenous leaders been improved?

None of the foregoing questions, however, directly relates to an assessment of what should be the intrinsic goals in any planned community intervention. The issue arises because there is always a question of whether and to what extent a substantial number of individuals are going to continue new behaviors that contribute to long-term development once a sequence of planned intervention ends.

Beyond the more immediate and middle-range benefits of a community center or citizens’ advisory council, long-range development is sustained by broadly based yet specific advances in behavior. These might involve widespread acceptance of new institutional sources for public health information, a progressive willingness of many individuals to work in public affairs with traditionally disenfranchised interest groups and classes, or

fundamental improvements in saving and investing surplus income.

If ongoing behaviors have not changed in some measurable ways, verifiable only by both baseline and post-intervention data, can the organizing or development effort really be viewed as a complete success? The value of achieving an instrumental or process objective (building a community center or increasing citizen participation) is substantially diminished without an accompanying and lasting change in associated behavior that underpins social advances on a broad front. Learning new behaviors that reach other facets of social life is, to repeat, a key ingredient of sustained development.

Although methodological questions can be raised regarding issues of internal validity, the need to assess long-term behavioral change is critical to any comprehensive evaluation of community organization practice. Assessment can be accomplished by using, as variables, one or more aspects of the social-learning process—cues, cognitions, the behavior itself, and the consequences of the behavior—to measure and monitor community-level intervention and behavioral change.

The following example, taken from a study of community development in India, illustrates the value of using sustained changes in behavior to measure the impact of efforts by community health workers:¹²

“A brief survey of a development block with fifty villages in the south of Gujarat state revealed that governmental health facilities were in operation. Outreach to villages by family planning and community worker was frequent and often was the only contact people in villages had with workers knowledgeable about Western medicine. As a source of primary health care, public facilities were generally underutilized, owing to cultural and organizational factors.

“The role of village-level community workers was analyzed to assess their impact on the use of health facilities by individuals and villages—what may be called ‘utilization’ behaviors. The data showed that outreach activity in these villages (the number of visits to villages and meetings) did not make a significant difference in these behaviors, while factors such as distance to health centers, wealth and literacy rates, and the existence of local voluntary associations did have an impact.”

In terms of evaluation, then, the *behavioral* goal—sustained and measurable utilization of local public health facilities—became the main criterion for assessing interventions by community workers. Although other behavioral goals, such as permanent adoption of a life-style of preventive health or a scientific approach to farming, could have been selected for study, the analysis was limited to curative health actions. In this instance, community intervention was not found to be significant; however, variations in other settings and circumstances might result in different utilization behaviors. This kind of evaluation, based in part on recognition of the

importance of behavioral measures, can supplement less behavior-specific attempts to measure success and failure of community intervention and ultimately result in more effective decision-making and efficient allocation of the developmental resources.¹³

Miscellaneous Applications

Although the use of social-learning theory to analyze and remedy societal problems is a recent development, a number of examples have been reported. There have been numerous studies in large institutional settings—industries, corrections, and welfare.¹⁴ There have also been some studies that focused on the urban communities, neighborhoods, villages, or voluntary associations that are generally the main sites of community organization.

A handful of studies that illustrate the application of social-learning theory and techniques to upgrade citizen action and participation can be cited. For example, one project was designed to increase the attendance of welfare recipients at self-help meetings.¹⁵ Meetings were held monthly to deal with health and welfare problems as well as broader community issues, such as urban renewal, school-board policy, and police problems. Self-selected rewards in the form of Christmas toys, household goods, and the like were given to those who attended the meetings. The effect was to attract new members (although not necessarily to keep them).

Applications of social-learning theory to community work are also well illustrated in a study of behaviorally oriented training (using models) to develop problem-solving actions in meetings of a Board of Directors of a Head Start program in a low-income community.¹⁶ Before the training, board meetings were fragmented, chaotic, and generally unproductive. Firm decisions were seldom made; when firm decisions were occasionally made, they were not carried out. The remedy involved three sought-after terminal behaviors by members of the board: explicit identification and isolation of problems, specification and evaluation of alternative solutions, and decision-making coupled with plans for follow-up actions. The successful training incorporated the modeling of these behaviors, role-playing, and scheduled reinforcement.

There are many other areas of community practice in which social-learning theory and techniques may be helpful. In massive grass-roots fundraising efforts that rely on door-to-door canvassing, modeling and role-playing are indispensable elements in training canvassers.¹⁷ During actual canvassing, canvassers' careful assessment of suitable reinforcing responses during contacts at the door can be pivotal in eliciting contributions.

Principles of social learning can also inform a strategy of preventive health education in a community-based clinic. For example, a preliminary survey of key environmental cues that precede undesirable health

behaviors would undoubtedly produce useful clues for a remedial program.

Furthermore, the social-learning model specifies the generic conditions for failures of individual behavior and hence is of broad analytic and predictive value to community practitioners. Mager and Pipe identified five conditions for nonperformance of any desired behavior, four environmental and one cognitive: (1) the desired behavior is punishing, (2) alternative behavior is more attractive, (3) there are no consequences—good or bad—of meeting the expectations of performance, (4) there is some obstacle in the environment, or (5) the person has doubts about his or her ability to perform the desired behavior.¹⁸ These are useful indexes for gauging intervention.

Reflections

Understanding social-learning processes is central to the development of a more complete and genuinely useful practice theory of community organization and social planning. The aim of this article has been to encourage students and practitioners of community intervention to consider seriously the value of the social-learning model for their ongoing work.

The social-learning model of individual behavior not only undergirds and explicates many other theories, but it spins off its own unique principles for practice. That is, it does not replace but complements other theories, such as those centering on social change, exchange and power relations, organizational behavior, and political economic development.

The authors have some concern, however, about approaching mezzo and macro-level social phenomena with a theory that has its primary empirical base in a long series of micro-level (individual and small-group) studies. While some social-learning principles are unarguably appropriate for mezzo practice (with organizations) and macro practice (in the community and society), others are not, and a great deal of caution is necessary in adapting the theory for these purposes. Concepts and techniques must continue to be thoroughly explored, subjected to systematic empirical research, and carefully tested in practice.

It must also be recognized that many community practitioners have reservations about "behavioral technology." The subject of behaviorism often engenders the specter of malevolent social controls or the use of aversive stimuli on unsuspecting clients. These fears, extended to community organizing, become even more sobering.

It would be disingenuous, after earlier plaudits, to suggest that social-learning knowledge is anything less than a powerful lever for influencing human behavior. The authors' view, however, is that the humanistic rejection of "behavioral control" is more rhetorical than real, primarily because all efforts to achieve social change

involve attempts to control human behavior. The use of social-learning techniques, like every aspect of community practice, is subject to abuse and can only be justified and legitimated by acceptance through open, democratic consent. Manipulation and coercion are not only unethical but likely to be unproductive and dangerous by generating aggressive counter-controlling behavior in those who suffer the consequences.

Conclusion

Although there exists an unequivocal potential for abuse of social-learning knowledge, very likely realized already in a number of institutional settings, this is true of virtually all practice theories and techniques. And the widest circulation of the concepts and procedures may be the best defensive strategy in an open society where suppression of information is not possible or desirable. Certainly, grassroots organizations, rural villages, urban

neighborhoods, and communities should not be excluded from using this knowledge to defend their interests and to attain collective goods.

This article has presented several brief but nonetheless clear examples that point to the benefits of social-learning theory and techniques for community practice. Other instances abound, both in the literature and in the experiences of community organizers around the world. The authors believe that through integration and application of social-learning knowledge, community practice can achieve a quantum leap in every aspect of community organization and community development. They are currently pursuing a number of possibilities along these lines.¹⁹ Ultimately, however, the utility of the social-learning model must be tested and confirmed in practice by innumerable organizers, intuitively attempting, assessing, and adjusting their own interventions for maximum results.

Notes and References

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² Brager and Specht, op. cit., p. 263; and Roland Warren, Types of Purposive Social Change at the Community Level, Brandeis University Papers in Social Welfare, No. 11 (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University, 1965).

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¹³ In a more general context, Robert Washington suggests a behavioral model as an alternative framework for program evaluation. See Washington, "Alternative Frameworks for Program Evaluation," in Fred Cox et al., *Tactics and Techniques of Community Practice* (Itasca, Ill.: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1977), pp. 340-353.

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¹⁵ Keith L. Miller and O.L. Miller, "Reinforcing Self-Help Group Activities of Welfare Recipients," *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 3 (Spring 1970), pp. 57- 64. For more on related problems of the National Welfare Rights Organization, see Lawrence Neil Bailis, *Bread or Justice: Grassroots Organizing in the Welfare Rights Movement* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1974).

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¹⁸ Robert Mager and Peter Pipe, *Analyzing Performance Problems or "You Really Oughta Wanna"* (Belmont, Calif.: Fearon Publishers, 1970).

¹⁹ Stanley Weisner is involved in a project at Children's Hospital Medical Center in Oakland, California, which focuses on the utilization behavior of its ambulatory care patients. The project is discussed in a paper in the forthcoming "Proceedings of a Conference on Social Work in Health Care" (at the University of Washington in August 1979). Michael Silver's doctoral dissertation, "Social Infrastructure Organizing Technology" (DSW thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1980), presents a unified field theory for community organization practice based on concepts of social learning, exchange, construction of reality, and political-economic development.