

# Ecological thinking: Four qualities

JAMES G. KELLY (\*)

Thinking ecologically is invigorating.

When I started to think ecologically in the 1960's there was a different political context within psychology than today. It was a time of single independent and dependent variables, objective methods and attention to the pathology of the individual. The psychologist was the detached observer gathering information by tried and true and sanctioned methods that would so often validate the psychologists' ideas unconnected with the lives of people in their community.

I believed that such an approach could not work for the topics of community psychology. As I saw it the aim could be to design preventive interventions in real communities. This meant that the concepts of history and culture and class were as central as the qualities of individuals. Especially this was so if the community psychologist desired to understand or reduce community tensions or help introduce a new program in the community. I believed that the ecologically oriented community psychologist had to have patience and employ multiple methods grounded in the community (Kelly, 1986). The premise was that every community was unique. The ecological community psychologist would need to be free from a straight jacket of psychological imperialism. Community psychologists as a profession, I believe, should enhance the

development of communities rather than only study individuals in a community.

There have been others who have developed their own ecological approaches. Certainly most notable has been Edison Trickett who has contributed extensively (Trickett, 1984). There are others like Ken Maton who has emphasized the analysis of church settings and the topic of social transformation (Maton, 2000). Rebecca Campbell has focused on the analysis of how the legal, medical, and mental health systems responded to the needs of rape victims (Campbell, 1998). Meg Bond has looked at the change processes to create a more diverse workforce in an organization over a seven-year period (Bond, 2007).

There are others with their own unique contributions like Beth Shinn (1996) editing an analysis on ecological assessment as well as Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), Rudy Moos (2002) and others I do not even know or know of. So my words are not the last word or the only words on the topic. All these contributors deserve your investigation for their unique insights.

Here is what an ecological perspective means to me. I will mention four attributes or qualities. There is now some empirical basis for these qualities.

- 1) Thinking about people can be accomplished while at the same time thinking about their social environments AND the interdependence of both upon each other.

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(\*) University of California at Davis.

- 2) Creating methods congruent with the culture of a community can enhance understanding life in a community.
- 3) Generating innovative community based programs requires the community psychologist to establish a relationship of trust with representatives of that community. Without a relationship of trust there will be little useful knowledge learned or applied.
- 4) The active working relationship between the community psychologist and the community often generates knowledge and insights that are new to the community psychologist. The community psychologist is a co-learner.

The caveat for each of these four points is that the community psychologist, as ecologist, is not just an expert. The community psychologist performs a role, which enhances the very process of doing community psychology. Much of the learned insights depend on the in depth knowledge about the local culture and its history, conflicts and hopes.

There is a different paradigm for being an ecologist. While knowledge from a far is carefully evaluated, knowledge of the local setting is primary. Such knowledge derives from the currency of real issues faced by the various sub groupings of the community. The ecological psychologist works to limit the power and prestige of the psychologist while creating a shared grounded platform to work together. Respect from the community is essential.

#### THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF PERSONS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

Our premises about people and places often establish dichotomies between the individual and the place. Predictions about the effects of people on organizations or ideas on how organizations affect people are offered as either or. What is ecological is to consider ways in which persons with different qualities can have different adaptations in various places (Edwards & Kelly, 1980; Kelly, 1971).

My first expedition was studying boys who varied in levels of exploratory preferences in two contrasting high schools outside of Detroit (Kelly, 1979, 1988a,b). The focus was to look at how the boys adapted to high schools with varied qualities. The schools were selected on the basis of the exchange of students, i.e., the number of students entering and leaving during the academic year. One school had a higher rate of exchange than the other school. Doctoral students and I found that there was a pattern that high explorers adapted well at both schools. But, high explorers had more episodes of difficulty at the constant school.

The real world complexity of the boys and the schools cautioned too neat a formulation. What was revealed was a pattern where there were differences in satisfaction with the two schools and the high explorer boys expressed more competences independent of school. So the ecological notions were revised so they reflected the conditions on the ground.

What I learned is that ecological thinking is generative and challenging. Ecological truth is not fixed. It requires researchers to be committed to a continuous process of revision of ideas. Contexts are shifting. People are changing. So the interdependence of people and places is evolving. This reality influences how knowledge is created and revised.

#### UNDERSTANDING LIFE IN COMMUNITIES CAN BE ENHANCED BY CREATING METHODS CONGRUENT WITH THE CULTURE OF THAT PLACE

Thirty years later when creating a social process for documenting the development of community leaders it was clear that participation with citizens in the documentation would be enhanced when the leaders themselves determined the method of choice. They chose an interview. Representatives of the community contributed to the design of the interview and some served as interviewers.

It was my belief that the findings from the interview would be best interpreted if the

analyses were carried out so that the findings could be interpreted within their culture.

These leaders were committed to the development of new community leaders. So after dialogue with the community the findings of the interview were presented as a tree of preferences for each of the 80 leaders. The tree symbolized personal growth and durability.

This was an invigorating challenge and an unusual one. Data were presented on the basis of each of the leaders' activities and interests. The result was that the group of 80 leaders attended to the results. While there was not a ground swell to examine the niceties of the findings the findings from the inquiry represented by the trees for each participant produced a vocabulary for the staff to use in the future training of new leaders.

Creating methods that are unique to the specific community is a challenging activity. There is no storehouse of methods to draw from, no standardized set of tests. Ecological Inquiry is an expedition to reflect those topics that are salient for that particular group of participants.

The tradeoff is that while there maybe less opportunity to generalize to a new community there is more likelihood for this present community to attend to the data because the leaders themselves with the active participation of the research group jointly created the methods and the research process. That is a trade off that represents how an ecological perspective can be a resource for a truly community based inquiry. As a potential bonus there maybe new ideas that can be helpful to the local community.

RESEARCH AND ACTION PROGRAMS  
REQUIRES THE COMMUNITY  
PSYCHOLOGIST TO ESTABLISH  
A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST.  
TRUST IS PARAMOUNT

Establishing trust includes a series of skills and qualities that maybe hard to identify. As a starter the community psychologist has minimum hidden agendas. He or she is an attentive and responsive listener. Also there is an explicit inner understanding of why this activity is being undertaken. I have learned that

community residents have a talent for sensing our motivations. If the community members are not convinced of our real motivations the journey will be slow until we the community psychologist comes clean. This is often difficult if we some how are unknowingly elitist and communicate that we are in fact better than the community participants. This has been so in all my activities. It was so in working with the two high schools, faculty and students back in Michigan the 1960's. It was certainly true in working with the community leaders in Chicago in the 1990's.

There are consequences. Since doctoral programs do not usually select for qualities related to building trust the faculty mentor has more responsibility to support the efforts of students to build trust. Building trust includes such prosaic qualities as being punctual and actually doing what we say we are going to do.

We can then better learn about the resources and constraints of being a high school faculty or high school student or an African American citizen residing in a community that has been or is being oppressed by economic conditions (Kelly, 1999; Kelly, Azelton, Lardon, Mock, Tandon, & Thomas, 2004).

There are certainly new requirements in being an ecological community psychologist. These are extra expectations that are not always noted or valued. So building trust can be enhanced when the community psychologist creates a supportive structure and process that encourages openness and feedback.

Being an ecological psychologist means being open to feedback and insights from others. Trust is not only a desirable quality of the individual but is a pre condition that creates a solid basis for collaborative work. The result is that the work not only has more creditability with the citizens but there is an increased chance that the findings may really contribute to the promotion of the community (Kelly, 2006). When this happens there is a rich sense of being whole and valid. With trust there is more opportunity for a sense of mutual accomplishment that makes the expedition a worthwhile activity for all. The result can be that, both citizens and scholars may look forward to carry out another ecological expedition.

UNDERSTANDING A COMMUNITY  
MEANS THE COMMUNITY  
PSYCHOLOGIST LEARNS  
ABOUT ONESELF AND THE COMMUNITY

There can be a premise that the psychologist only treats or studies others. This premise is altered in the ecological perspective so that it is public, clear and knowable and that the community psychologist learns as much as the citizens. This learning is not about facts but about how we are perceived, how our qualities are expressed without always our knowledge. Are we prepared to be “studied” ourselves and be vulnerable to have our quirks visible and examined? This is not an easy process.

In the high school research mentioned above I was challenged by the high schools’ notion that faculty from the University of Michigan were elitist. That the research group was pretentious. Was I really like that? If not, could I be myself? If so, would the faculty and students in the two high schools like what they saw?

Fortunately there was a talented group of doctoral students who were not trapped by the aura of status. The total U of M group was able to create an openness that facilitated the demanding work to be carried out over six years. While stressful, the impact on all of us was clear. WE REALLY began to understand the complexities of the social environment of high schools and the demands on students to survive the high school years. We also learned some about the external political and financial requirements impacting the school administration and faculty and indirectly on students (Tandon, Azelton, Kelly, & Strickland, 1998).

I personally have learned that my anxiety to resolve issues and maintain a rhythm in my work needs to be balanced with the demands of the participants. I have also learned to evolve my trust so that I am more relaxed with the discovery process.

Obviously this learning helps me to cope with the next opportunity to work with new community participants. It’s a fulfilling to keep enlarging ones sense about the processes of communities and oneself.

CONCLUSION

Thinking ecologically is compatible with doing community research or practice. It is clearly an antidote against adopting a colonial, elitist or precious view of how to think, how to inquire and how to innovate. Most especially it is a resource to learn about the processes of change and development in communities, our collaborating citizens and us. These are substantial benefits that can be life long.

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## ABSTRACT

The article proposes a journey on the ecological premises or attributes of ecological thinking. Identifies its four main qualities and probes to demonstrate how at present there is some empirical evidence upon which such premises may be anchored. The first is focused on the interdependencies of persons and social environments, the second is that research methodologies may be congruent with the culture of place, the third that to the community psychologist is required to establish trust relationships, and the fourth that understanding a community means learning about oneself

*Key words:* Adaptation, Ecological thinking, Interdependency.

## RESUMO

O artigo propõe uma viagem em torno dos pressupostos ecológicos ou atributos do pensamento ecológico. Identifica as suas principais quatro qualidades e procura demonstrar como se podem fundamentar em evidência empírica. A primeira das premissas focaliza-se na interdependência das pessoas e os seus ambientes sociais, a segunda que as metodologias de investigação podem ser congruentes com a cultura de um lugar ou de um contexto concretos. Em terceiro lugar que ao(à) psicólogo(a) comunitário é requerido que desenvolva relações de confiança e a quarta que na sua busca de entendimento acerca da comunidade aprenda mais sobre si próprio(a).

*Palavras chave:* Adaptação, Interdependência, Pensamento ecológico.

