

Developing Prosocial Communities Across Cultures

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 Springer

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ISBN-13: 978-0-387-71484-4

e-ISBN-13: 978-0-387-71485-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007927756

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Printed on acid-free paper.

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Preface

Over the course of a long and varied career I have engaged in many kinds of scholarly and social activities and written about them for a variety of audiences. As I finished each project, I felt both a sense of accomplishment and a sense that I had not completely answered the questions with which I was concerned. Several years ago I wrote a comprehensive book in which I sought to interrelate individual and social aspects of human conduct. It answered many questions for me but still left me unsatisfied. What was left was the hardest task we face in our lives; namely, translating our ideas, or theories as we call them in academia, into some directives for applying them so that they can make a difference in our own and other people's lives. What I have tried to do here is focus on communities as the vital link in my theories about the process between people and their environments.

In fact, it is that translation task that has been the central challenge in my life personally as well as professionally. I grew up in poverty in a small rural town during the economic depression of the 1930s in the United States. I came of age in the U. S. infantry in World War II. During that time I was taught by the adults around me that the answer to my questions and the world's injustices lay in believing what I was told and overcoming my own shortcomings. In college, as I turned to psychology for better guidance, I was told that the answer was to learn the theories I was being taught. I was faced with the unspoken assumption that applying my theoretical knowledge would solve everything, including my shortcomings.

During all of that time I was interacting with people who were members of different kinds of communities and societies. We were all trying to formulate meaningful conceptions of our selves, our lives, our experiences, and our social contexts. We were shaping and being shaped by our interactions and other social and ecological forces in our lives. But I did not know that then, so as I chose to become a clinical psychologist I continued to believe that the road to improving my own life and those of others individually and socially lay in developing and applying theories of individual change.

Instead, what I began to discover was a history of incomplete successes and failures in my own personal and professional experiences and in the world around

me. I found that in most psychology and related projects, the change agents involved remained detached from the situation, seeking only to solve the problems they had isolated. They often did not evaluate their work or follow through to be sure that projects were continued. For example, community programs were developed without a clear formulation of what the developers were trying to accomplish or how their approaches and results might be relevant to the people (or groups) involved or the conditions of their lives.

I gradually became increasingly dissatisfied with this status quo and began to think that I needed to understand the specific characteristics of people, their contexts, and how the two interact. That was the only way I was going to be able to apply any of my psychological or personal knowledge to helping myself or others improve my/their lives or situations. Further, I began to realize that there is and cannot be any theoretically prescribed way to apply theoretical knowledge to solve human problems. What we have to do is learn how to become engaged with people and then to work together to understand their lives and situations and how to improve them.

Otherwise stated, people's problems are basically humanitarian, not psychological. What I have been trying to learn is how to base our psychological understandings on that humanitarian perspective. It is the most difficult challenge I have ever faced. This book is an account of my struggle and that of many others who have joined with me in facing that challenge.

In this book, I have tried to show why a prosocial community focus is essential to the accomplishment of the goals of community psychology and related fields and to describe how to create such communities. The book incorporates a multicultural, multiethnic approach with documentary research and programmatic support for its efficacy. It identifies and demonstrates the nature of the links between community and individual functioning in ways that aid readers in understanding them. It also provides examples to enable people seeking community changes to know how to effectively translate these ideas into practice.

Our communities are the basic vital social units that provide the contexts in which we learn to live together to our mutual benefit. I have focused on them here as being crucial to providing a richer and more fulfilling framework than we currently have for understanding and improving the quality of our individual and collective lives. It is my hope that readers will find this material useful as a guide for building their own prosocial communities and enriching the quality of their personal and professional lives and of those with whom they interact. This book is to use, not just to provide an intellectual exercise.

I begin the book by defining what a prosocial community is, identify its elements and relevant interrelationships, and then provide the available evidence in support of those conclusions. I have used my conceptual frameworks for encompassing and integrating these psychological and social considerations to account for how people can form prosocial communities, function within them, and change them when desired. For example, before you can begin to construct prosocial communities, you need to understand the specific characteristics of the people involved, their situations, and how the two interact. The same is true of the

groups in those communities. The book establishes that only when those factors are integrated does it become possible to accomplish the long range task of forming prosocial communities.

In this book I think I have expressed as best I can my answer to my question about how to use our capabilities and our knowledge to improve on the quality of our individual and collective lives. The answer is that we live together as well as apart and have to engage ourselves together or we will, perhaps, destroy ourselves individually and together. I am deeply indebted to those who have enriched my life and helped me arrive at this point. Whatever errors and shortcomings are found in this text are a product of my limitations, not those of others. I hope that any such errors do not detract from the larger message I have tried to convey and that you, my readers, will find helpful ideas and suggestions as you work to build prosocial lives and communities.

Acknowledgments

It simply is not possible to acknowledge everyone who has contributed to the contents of this book and to my writing. What I will do is thank those who have been singularly important influences. First and foremost is Sandy, my wife, colleague, editor, and life companion. We have traveled to remote destinations and worked together in often confusing and uncomfortable circumstances for substantial periods of time. In doing so, we have shared some fascinating and enriching experiences. Most often we have worked hard and been richly rewarded for our efforts by the courtesy, support, and very human caring from the people we came to know. We have also spent interminable hours together trying to make sense of our experiences. Those efforts have made this book far richer in ideas than it otherwise would have been. I am more deeply indebted to her than I will ever be able to repay.

Curt Rhodes and his contribution to my understanding of prosocial issues are in evidence, particularly in Chapter Seven, which we wrote in collaboration. It provides a culmination to this book by illustrating how a prosocial community approach can be used to guide the development of what is now a nation-wide effort at providing a better quality of life for the people of Jordan, particularly their marginalized youth and families. It also provides abundant evidence of Curt's brilliance and resourcefulness as a developer of such programs. I appreciate having had the opportunity to meet, work with, and become a friend of Curt's. To learn more about his broader record and accomplishments, please turn to the biographic statement just following chapter.

Wade Pickren, a wise and thoughtful psychologist and friend, has read this manuscript in detail and contributed many important insights that have sharpened my thinking and greatly improved the message here. His gently humane and thoughtful questions have been invaluable. I am also particularly grateful to two exceptional undergraduate psychology students, Rhea Pechter and Laura Schofield. Over the course of several semesters, they have read this manuscript many times and contributed much to making it intelligible, coherent, and much more interesting to read than it would have been otherwise.

My most important source of institutional support has been the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland, where I have spent over thirty five years. My colleagues have accommodated my often atypical activities and departures to other lands for extended periods and provided me with the office and facilitates that have enabled me to write this and earlier books. A number of universities, medical schools, clinics, community centers, and mental hospitals in the United States and in other countries have welcomed me graciously. Colleagues in all of these places have been enormously helpful in explaining how they see my world and supportive of my efforts to understand their worlds as we struggled together to understand each other. Included in that list are colleagues from the Universities of Allahabad, India; Waikato University in Hamilton, New Zealand; and Beijing University in China. In Colombia, there were the Universities of Javeriana, Los Andes, and the National University in Bogota; the Universidad del Valle, in Cali; and the Universidad del Norte, in Barranquilla. Finally, in Santiago, Chile, there was the Universidad Catolica. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health, National Science Foundation, Agency on Aging, Office of Substance Abuse Research, the Fulbright Commission, and the Indio-American Fellowship Program as well as the University of Maryland have provided institutional and financial support without which most of my journeys and much of my work would not have been possible.

Equally vital to my understanding have been the people in many walks of life in my own and other countries with whom I have had an opportunity to know and interact. Their vitality and commitment to the joy of living (though for some under the harshest of circumstances) never cease to amaze me or rejuvenate my own spirits. Their generosity and trust in sharing their lives and experiences with me have been truly remarkable and greatly appreciated. They have given me far more in the way of insights and wisdom than I could have imagined or discovered on my own.

My editors at Springer has been supportive and understanding as I have completed this book. I am grateful to them. I hope that the response of readers will confirm for them that their investment in my book has been worthwhile.