

Getting the social organism thinking: strategy for systems change

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Abstract The ability of community researchers/practitioners to facilitate systems change is constrained by social power—particularly the capacity to shape ideology [S. Lukes (1974). *Power: A radical view*. Hampshire: MacMillan] and frequently power molds ideologies which undermine systems thinking. Following what Mills [C. W. Mills, (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press] (termed the “sociological imagination”, this article makes the case for a strategy of systems change that promotes an integrated focus on systems and their constituent individuals. Both of these components are understood to continuously shape each other. The *social imagination* is introduced as a way to conceptualize the intersection between individuals’ conceptions of systems and the ways that systems work to form individual identities and perceptions of social reality. Examples of attempts at systems change from community organizing and public health are used to illustrate both common fallacies and potential future directions for systems change efforts.

Keywords Systems change · Power · Ecological theory · Obesity · Violent crime · Intervention · Systems thinking · Community organizing

Introduction

In 1894, the workers at the Pullman Palace Car Company, a Chicago-based railroad car manufacturer, went on strike against the repressive policies of the company. The workers were required to live in the company town of Pullman, Illinois. Rent was deducted from their paychecks. The town had repressive and paternalistic regulations, and was increasingly unaffordable (Papke, 1999). At that time, a labor strike was a new tactic. The Pullman strike captured the attention of the nation. It did so not only due to dramatic appeal, but because the strike had the effect of paralyzing the railroad industry. Within several months, a federal court ruled that the strike was illegal and troops were used to break the strike. The clash of workers and soldiers resulted in a forcible return to work for most workers, under the same conditions as before the strike. Others were put out of work and blacklisted from employment in the railroad industry. The organizers of the strike were arrested.

Although the strike was a failure, it succeeded in ways that were more far-reaching. The upheaval played a pivotal role in labor relations across the industrializing world (Almont, 1942). It did so by changing the way that the public thought about the social, economic and legal systems of that era. The potential of the controversial strike to contribute to this larger change was not lost on John Dewey, who was in Chicago at the time. Dewey wrote to his wife, Alice, that the strike was a way to “get the social organism thinking” (Menand, 2001; pg. 299). Unlike many of the public intellectuals of that time, Dewey emphasized the role of social systems in the formation of individual identities. For Dewey, parts of society could not function except as they functioned as a whole. That some portion of society might begin *thinking* in more complex ways about

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the relationships of its constituent systems was a critical issue for him. Dewey understood that how individuals within a system understood that system—particularly their collective imagination—was a fundamental aspect of social change.

This paper draws attention to the social imagination as it relates to applied research, community interventions, and other attempts at systems change. In these endeavors, we propose that it is this type of consideration which is often lacking. The article begins with theoretical consideration of the social imagination, and then discusses more practical examples involving obesity and violent crime. Community psychology is then discussed in relation to the social imagination and potential to catalyze desirable systems change.

The social imagination

The *social imagination* is similar to what Mills (1959) described as the sociological imagination, “a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger realities” (p. 15). In particular, he was concerned with individuals making the connection between personal problems and the influence of broader social processes on those problems. This focus on imagination, quality of mind and the ability of individuals to perceive the roles of systemic forces within individual experiences is reflective of our stance on strategies for producing desirable systems change. The social imagination is not a prescriptive or foundational concept—it is pragmatic. Systems change, as it is discussed in this paper, is broadly defined as any alteration in social, economic, environmental, or political systems that affect human communities. Constitution of a “desirable” change in systems must be determined by context and value positions.¹

The emphasis on the consciousness of individuals regarding social systems has been a longstanding question in social science, most commonly expressed in the debate between structure and agency. Within these debates, other scholars have joined Dewey and Mills in the conversation on consciousness in relation to structural constraints. For Bourdieu (1998) the notion of habitus was the unspoken yet nevertheless shared understanding individuals have of social life and social structures. Similarly, Habermas (1981) speaks of the life-world—the social world maintained through the taken for granted knowledge shared by individuals in that society. It is Giddens (1984) however,

who most directly assesses the form of social consciousness relevant to systems change by weaving together theoretical dichotomies such as system/individual and subject/object.

In structuration theory, Giddens (1984) elucidates two types of consciousness. Practical consciousness addresses actions individuals undertake without thinking about them, the same concern shared by Dewey (Cohen, 1996). In contrast, discursive consciousness addresses the reasoning one holds about their environment and the rules or guidelines through which social systems operate. The cultivation of a discursive consciousness most closely parallels the interest of this article—how social actors can move beyond practical consciousness into a frame of mind that more readily allows actions that influence broader social systems in desirable ways.

The central thesis of this paper is that lasting systems change requires activity of the *social imagination*—a theoretical concept that describes the interstices between private thought and personal experience and systemic forces ranging from trends in thought to structural conditions. Our notion of the social imagination is broader than Mills’, who focused on academics and more pragmatic than Giddens’ or Habermas’, both of whom seek grand theory; our focus is on community with an emphasis on the role of cultural beliefs, ideology and shared understandings in shaping the views that individuals hold about the systems and societies of which they are a part. By making it a singular term, we are emphasizing its social construction and tendency to be spread out in patterns across individuals. Although individuals within systems are the bearers of a social imagination, they are not entirely individually responsible for the views they hold, or for changing them. This is true for scholars of social systems just as it is for politicians, plumbers and poets. We assert that the social imagination is key in making systems change, and can be altered through the following: a reconciled view of individual and system, movement toward greater complexity, an eye toward power relationships, and a search for connections and points of leverage.

A reconciled view of individual and system

Dewey held that if we begin by talking about individuals, we necessarily work our way to communities, and if we begin by talking about communities, we work our way to individuals. Following Dewey and Giddens on this point, we do not ascribe primacy to either concept, and question the usefulness of establishing such a dualism. Individual change and systems change must be understood and aimed for as simultaneous occurrences. Examining dynamic interplay between individuals and systems in change processes, it becomes difficult—if not impossible—to treat the

¹ The constitution of “desirable” systems change, while outside the scope of this paper, is a topic in need of thorough consideration. For present purposes, our treatment of this question remains general.

two as distinct conceptual entities. Each individual exists within a set of systems that equips them with the understanding of what their individuality means. The systems are not only what allow individuals to formulate their individuality; they also provide the range of ways in which to envision the systems themselves (Foucault, 1970). In this way, systems thinking tends to be systemically influenced—that is, knowledge is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)—and knowledge about social systems and individualism are not exceptions. Aiming to reflect this point of view in efforts at systems change stands to push notions of individuals and social networks toward greater complexity.

Movement toward greater complexity

Complex thinking about systems has, historically, been applied to a range of extra-individual contexts or environments, from family systems (Bowen, 1978) to global ‘world-systems’ (Timberlake, 1987). Complex thinking, in this sense, means attending to the influence of settings and environments which not only constrain or advantage, but also guide and direct individual behaviors. However, thinking at these extra-individual levels should not preclude simultaneous attention to genetics, brain functioning and attitudes for an understanding of individual behavior. Systems thinking that engages the social imagination often examines patterns of relationships among components, as compared to a predominant focus on components themselves (Newbrough, 1973)—whether those components are individuals or forms of social organization. It directs attention to change processes within a transactional worldview (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). While movement toward this type of complexity typically takes place in times of personal or social crises, it is also possible to engage it through intentional change processes similar to what Dewey (1916) calls education, what Friere (1970) calls conscientization, or through various types of civic engagement. Attempts at systems change that account for the development of this complexity are typically flexible, with plenty of room for ambiguity. Competing perspectives are allowed to be held, and diversity is seen as an asset. Approaches such as soft systems methodology (Checkland & Scholes, 1990) or geographic representation (Craig, Harris, & Weiner, 2002) that use visualization techniques are often helpful in organizing complex information.

An eye toward power relationships

What is thought to be “true” of systems is often reflective of ‘truth’ as produced through power relationships (Foucault, 1980). A key feature of systems and the individual

identities with which they interact is the role of power. While there are many aspects to the concept of power, in this context we are focused on the role of power in shaping how individuals understand their world and the influence of this understanding on individual actions. That is, we are interested in how power is linked to knowledge (both tacit knowledge or what Giddens terms ‘practical consciousness’ and critical knowledge or ‘discursive consciousness’) as well as the influence of that knowledge on action and agency. As such, we are concerned with an understanding of how systems influence and shape the lives of individuals—structure—as well as how, and to what degree, individuals can alter this structure—agency. What role can the social imagination have on increasing agency? What role does social power play in this process?

While the exercise of power through the mobilization of bias and ideology tends to be better at preventing change than achieving it, our interest is in how the social imagination can operate as a mechanism of power to support processes and agents of change (Speer & Hughey, 1995). Interventions for systems change often benefit by acknowledging power as a driving and inhibiting force in human action, belief, and perception. An understanding of power dynamics (i.e. Foucault, 1980; Lukes, 1974) not only illuminates transactions between systems and individuals, it provides keys to change.

A search for connections and points of leverage

The interest in exploring the points of leverage and resistance—the points at which actions provoke strong reactions—arises from the desire to improve current systems. In order to identify these points of leverage, we are proposing an emphasis on the pattern of transactions among component parts. While it is likely that no two individuals have an identical understanding of the ways that social systems function—or how they personally fit and function within them—it is also likely that these cognitive representations are more similar as individuals approach each other’s roles and positions within systems. A systems change, then, often occurs in concert with changes in the social imagination, which produces impacts on individual identities. This formulation goes a long way toward explaining the intransigence of social systems (Marcuse, 1964). For an individual to change an individualistic belief about causal relationships with violent crime, for instance, requires them to alter existing schemas about their own individuality and potential to commit violent crime. Subjective information about identity is often highly resistant to change (Kegan, 1982), and requires careful strategy to alter. Conceptual connections to larger realities and trends (Barabasi, 2002; Capra, 2002) are immensely helpful for this type of strategy. Information and events that lie at the interstices of the

personal and the public are often the points of greatest potential for getting the social organism thinking.

The need for systems change

The public and private worlds that most of the readers of this *American Journal* inhabit are those of historically unrivaled material luxury. Yet, as the volumes and issues of this journal continue to demonstrate, a surprising number of serious problems persist in wealthy American societies. Mental illnesses, addictions to harmful substances, obesity, poverty, homelessness, violent crime, the spread of preventable diseases, and extraordinarily high rates of incarceration continue to be prominent parts of the experience of civilian American life. Even for those fortunate enough to remain less scathed (none of us are entirely unaffected) by these problems, there is an increasing sense of alienation and anxiety (DeGraaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Wachtel, 1983) associated with overwork, debt, consumerism, overload, and the decline of social networks, among many other factors.

Beyond such social problems, the systems of advanced industrial society are also unsustainable. They are physically unsustainable as they draw so heavily on resources that are limited—and create new environmental problems as they do so. They are socially unsustainable because of the human suffering that they ignore, sustain, or create both in less wealthy parts of the world (which are inhabited by the majority of world citizens), and within the wealthy countries themselves. Thus, the current systems are considerably flawed. They do not seem to be maximizing benefits for those whom they privilege, while they simultaneously leave many people out—and hold others down. Problems have persisted that need not have.

Effective strategies for systems change must have the capacity to attend both to the larger structural components and dynamics that contribute to human suffering as well as the individual *people* who occupy and/or maintain that system. Although several fields of study, particularly sociology, have thoroughly examined our world from a systems-perspective, they have not given equal emphasis to individual, intrapsychic processes, nor have they consistently attended to the application of their work toward social change. Fields such as medicine and education are applying theory to practice, but have retained an almost exclusive focus on the individual, leaving out discussion of social problems. Other areas, such as social work or public health, have worked to balance theory with action and include the consideration of systems and how human lives are affected, but continue to focus primarily on individual-level change.

Systems are composed of individuals, each with a contextualized worldview and sense of agency. Systems

impinge on these worldviews, and in turn can be shaped by individual actors or actors working collectively. This is a transactional effect between system and inhabitant. Traditional psychology has spent over 100 years learning about this inhabitant, usually decontextualized, and its internal processes that form worldviews and determine behavior. We now know much and are learning more about how human beings take in and make sense of the world around them, yet we know relatively little about how this sense-making can be mobilized to shape that world.

Constraining forces on efforts for systems change

Systems thinking has given rise to the field of community psychology; this approach to thinking was institutionalized by collections of psychologists who were frustrated by working only within systems to treat symptoms rather than working on the systems to prevent or treat those symptoms. The systems thinking of the founders of community psychology is idealistic. It considers the *ought* along with the *is* and often considers strategies to bring the two closer together. Marcuse (1964) argues that the systems of advanced industrial society privilege positivist, rational thought—and consequently avoid the type of abstract and idealistic critique that has fueled the creation of this sub-field of psychology. The participants in the Swampscott conference (where a ‘community psychology’ was discussed) did not imagine the field only because of rational, empirically validated claims. Much of their energy came, as ours does, from distinctly unscientific ideals such as “the Good, the Beautiful, Peace and Justice” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 148). Forty years post-Swampscott, the field retains a healthy reserve regarding traditional scientific approaches (Rappaport, 2005).

While community psychologists share many values and ideals in common, some would envision making social changes that leave more of the existing systems in place and using empirical methods to refine and reform them strategically (a liberal reformism), while others would halt these systems entirely and reconsider the most fundamental aspects of systems (a radical or critical orientation). While there is some friction between these ideals, the shared territory is that of abstract idealism itself, and a hope for change toward more ideal systems, whether it is achieved through incremental or transformational means. Yet, these means of achieving systems change have proven somewhat resistant to universal theorizing and empirical study. Systems, identities, and ideologies are fluid and inescapably tied to existing and historic power relationships. These complexities require constant advancements in strategy for systems change.

Facilitating systems change may be advanced by revisiting one of the most common ideas embraced by community psychology, yet one of the most difficult ideas to accept in our society: context and environment influence behavior. Our field harkens back to Roger Barker and the notion of contextual influence every time we speak of ‘ecological theory’, yet our willingness to believe in this concept, and the magnitude of its influence, is rarely examined. Barker noted, “When environments are relatively uniform and stable, *people* are an obvious source of behavior variance ... But today *environments* are more varied and unstable than heretofore, and their contribution to the variance of behavior is enhanced” (1968, p. 3, italics in original).

In this era of globalization when we perpetually stress the idea that our world is changing and changing at an ever-faster rate, how often do we reflect on Barker’s notion that as environments become more dynamic they increase their impact on individual behavior? Do we consider this observation as we work on social problems that are increasing dramatically, such as asthma, obesity, school violence or attention deficit disorder?

In community psychology practice, the idea of contextual influence remains radical because it contradicts a dominant societal ideology of individual choice, freedom, free will and meritocracy, which all work, at a conceptual level, to negate ecological theory and structuration theory’s proposals which ascribe primacy to neither agent nor structure. A problem with our attempts at systems change may be that as psychologists, we still tend to conceptualize and intervene at the level of individuals. When social problems stem from broad systemic factors—from agricultural production policies to unregulated capitalism—we are powerless to create change at that level. In the face of this powerlessness, we may direct our attention to what we can affect—people. Although there are needs for interventions that help individuals adapt, such an approach falls far short of efforts that address systemic forces that create problems in living.

Strategies for Systems Change in Action

Toward a greater understanding and influence on systems change, we assert that attention must be paid to the interstices between individual thought/action and social structure and power. For community psychology, this requires revisiting and expanding existing ecological theory. These assertions are developed further in the following examples of attempts at systems change to prevent obesity and violent crime.

In the case of obesity, a broad set of studies and governmental reports demonstrate that obesity has increased

dramatically in the US over the last 30 years and in particular childhood obesity (Baskin, Ard, Franklin, & Allison, 2005). Obese and overweight persons are at greater risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and other detrimental health outcomes.² In response to this problem, programs have been developed that seek to prevent obesity and associated negative health outcomes. These preventive interventions, however, focus largely on altering the behavior of individuals rather than the environments, settings or systems that have contributed to obesity. Popular programs identified as ‘best practices’ address nutrition and physical activity through information dissemination in schools, workplaces and community settings (Koplan, Liverman, & Kraak, 2004; US Dept of Health & Human Services, 2001; 2004). As an example, the following is a quote from a publication assisting communities and institutions in the financing of childhood obesity prevention programs:

A variety of promising initiatives aimed at preventing childhood obesity are being undertaken at national, state, and community levels. These include efforts to encourage healthy lifestyles, including physical activity; promote fitness and nutrition education; support parental involvement in their children’s lives; provide access to safe facilities and neighborhoods for physical activity; and directly support adequate and healthy nutrition. (The Finance Project, 2004, p. 6).

Similarly, the American Obesity Association (2002) states, “behaviors involving physical activity and nutrition are the cornerstone of preventing obesity in children and adolescents. Families and schools are the two most critical links in providing the foundation for those behaviors”. Although there are scholars emphasizing the role of environment in obesity rates and negative health outcomes (Brown et al, 2004; Poston & Foreyt, 1999), there is much more research linking obesity to genetic causes, with claims that 50% to 80% of fatness is due to genetic differences in the population (Gibbs, 2005). Shifts of this magnitude require strategies that do not look solely toward atomistic causation. How might social systems and powerful forces influence this issue? How might we explain the doubling of obesity rates since 1980? Has the US genetic makeup been altered over the last 25 years?

Our suggestion is that the application of the social imagination to this social problem would lead to the consideration of alterations in our social systems that might explain changes in obesity. Certainly reduced levels of physical activity and poor nutrition lead to overweight and obese populations, but what contributes to reductions in

² The extent of the detrimental health outcomes is a point of current debate (Gibbs, 2005).

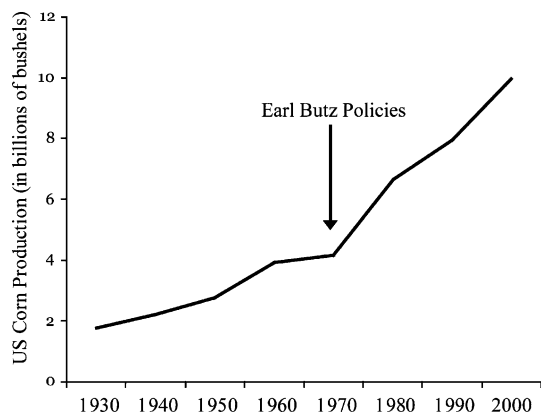


Fig. 1 Bumper crop: US corn production and agricultural policy

exercise and deteriorating diets? Pollan (2003) has made a strong case that systemic changes have created the obesity ‘epidemic’ by creating a massive overproduction of corn. He describes how agricultural policy decisions by Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, altered depression-era government policies that worked to modify grain production levels produced by the negative interaction of market forces and climate-related seasonal variations in crop yields. Though those in support of free markets oppose policies that intervene on market forces, the Nixon administration replaced the New Deal policy with direct subsidies to farmers. Today, the government pays grain producers over \$10 billion in subsidies to produce corn (Becker, 2003).

As seen in Fig. 1, these policies have massively transformed the supply of corn in the US. Today, corn is so plentiful and cheap that it is used in a variety of food and commercial products (from adhesives to batteries) but most notably it is transformed into high-fructose corn syrup and used as a sweetener in the vast majority of processed foods (Bray, Nielsen & Popkin, 2004; Smith, 1998). This overproduction has reduced prices so much that the raw materials for food are the cheapest component of processed foods, perversely resulting in the marketing of bargains in the form of increased proportions as the strategy for increasing sales (Young & Nestle, 2002). From an ecological orientation, we note that the 140% increase in corn production since 1970 translates into an environment that supplies 500 more calories per day per person in the US.

Just as Pollan did for nutrition, we might apply systems thinking to physical activity by exploring how suburban sprawl and automobile-centered lifestyles are shaped by complex systemic forces rather than the more common explanation of “market forces”, (i.e., an aggregate of individual decisions) in understanding reductions in physical activity (Frumkin, Frank & Jackson, 2004; Kunstler, 1993; Palen, 1995). The important point here is that the

analysis of agricultural policies reveals a complex connection to the private troubles and public issues of obesity. A social imagination examines problems at such a scale, and considers the ripple effect throughout the components of social systems, from government subsidies, to agricultural production processes, to fast food restaurants, to individual behavior.

However, identifying linkages between individual problems and societal policies does not necessarily imply a strategy for systems change that will impact the individual and local levels. The scale of public issues and the complexity of private troubles are daunting for individuals or groups wanting to make change.

Design of research & intervention for change

The use of models that include different levels radiating out from the individual and finishing at a macro-level can be both frustratingly simple and profound. Thinking in terms of such levels can be liberating if used for consideration of contextual influences on individuals. Alternatively, they can be a constraining rubric when they are used to classify or divide, since isolation of any level is an impossible extrication from the model. Rappaport (1977, 1987) proposed four levels of analysis at which interventions can operate—the individual, the interpersonal, the organizational, and the institutional/community. One feature of these levels of intervention is that the more complex interventions, at the larger levels of analysis are inclusive of intervention techniques included in the simpler levels.

A community organizing group in Camden, NJ developed an intervention seeking to reduce violent crime. In their analysis of violent crime in Camden, they came to view vacant housing as a catalyst for violent crime. The organization’s efforts to affect violent crime via housing policies were rejected by many in the community who charged that law enforcement was the appropriate solution to violent crime. Although it was a struggle to convince local officials of their perspective they ultimately prevailed and were able to alter housing policies in Camden with regard to vacant housing. This approach to violent crime was systemic in nature; it intervened at the level of community rather than at the level of individuals. This intervention reduced crime substantially on city blocks where vacant houses were boarded-up or demolished (Speer et al., 2003)³ but additionally, as shown in Fig. 2, associated impacts were found for violent assaults both in Camden and in the surrounding county.

³ See Speer et al., 2003 for additional information on violent crime reduction in Camden.

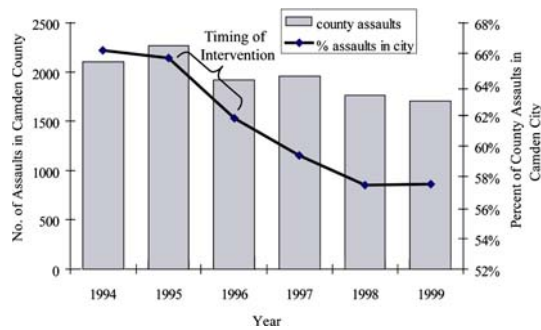


Fig. 2 Assaultive crime: city & county of Camden

Interestingly, the fact that violent crime was reduced in both absolute and relative terms, as opposed to being merely displaced, contradicts a deeply held belief (which we submit is a product of power) that crime is never really reduced but just displaced (Eck & Weisburd, 1995). The understandings that produce the idea of crime displacement include those that see crime as part of the nature of certain individuals, rather than as a response to environmental cues and opportunities. One implication from this case study is that settings do have an important influence on behavior—a finding that is supportive of an ecological approach.

Interventions of this sort that provide results that contradict individualistic approaches can be useful in pushing the social imaginations of other groups toward greater complexity, thereby encouraging still more interventions at extra-individual levels, as well as the more common considerations of individual variance. Here, we would echo Rappaport's (2005) thought that "to the extent that we provide alternatives and analyses that are intellectually and morally compelling, the field will make unique contributions to scholarship, research and action" (pg. 236). Such contributions do not always stem from a common theory or methodology, but they often are attentive to nuances in approach that are tied to the social imagination.

Community psychology as a vehicle for systems change

Community Psychology's particular approach to social science has much in common with views that do not ascribe primacy to either structure or agency, such as Dewey's and Giddens' perspectives on individuals and systems. Throughout community psychology, much work has drawn from scholars who have embraced systems thinking (i.e., Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Barker, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Seidman, 1988). Nevertheless, our discipline's embrace of systems thinking does not mean we have fully translated such an orientation into the practice of our research and action.

The blending of community with psychology explicitly links systems and individuals; moreover, this blending is the essence of the social imagination and key to the strategy we feel can promote systems change. Community psychology—as an orientation, a science, and an applied discipline—is positioned to address systems change as informed by the social imagination. However, this positioning is limited by our field's considerable efforts at distinguishing ourselves from traditional psychology. We often fail to appreciate those links to our roots that may now serve us well in addressing the social imagination. Psychology studies the consciousness of individual minds, and has developed an interventionist orientation drawn from the discipline's alignment with the medical model. We submit that these features, despite their historical problems, are necessary elements for understanding systems and how to change them.

The theoretical foundation for community psychology is ecological. Specifically, the hallmark of community psychology is an insistence that any one event or phenomenon cannot be fully understood without an examination of its context. This notion is epitomized by the well-known transactional view that behavior is a function of the person and the environment (Brodsky et al., 2004; Lewin, 1935) and the nested model of levels of analysis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Community psychology employs these theoretical tools to understand how systems work *in toto*, as well as how any one component is embedded within systems. Such a perspective allows for ways of examining and intervening in systems.

While it is true, then, that community psychology is well-positioned to conduct research and take action at points of leverage within systems, this has not frequently occurred. There are notable exceptions in our field. For example, Jason, Ji, Anes, & Birkhead (1991) scrutinized how legislative changes on tobacco access—an environmental intervention—reduced smoking rates of minors by 50%. Importantly, this form of intervention runs counter to many programs that focus on educating and socializing students away from tobacco use. The work by Jason and colleagues exemplifies the integration of individual and system, complexity and leverage to cultivate systems thinking. By pushing the complexities in the ways that we conceive of research and intervention we believe systems thinking, and change, can be cultivated.

Research that attends to the social imagination is necessarily concerned not only with current realities and perceptions of them, but with imaginary ideals and conceptions of them—similar to what Giddens terms discursive consciousness. Notions of the Good, the Beautiful, Peace and Justice are embedded in ideals and orientations. For instance, research attuned to the social imagination might concern itself with the critique of the ideals for

social functioning that are associated with community research. Examples include Riger (1993) on empowerment and Cooke and Kothari (2001) or Hickey and Mohan (2004) on participation.⁴ Similarly, it might be concerned with ideals associated with national or local policy, such as national security and family values, or regional economic development, residential segregation and sustainable growth. How are these ideals transactionally shaped by social forces and individuals? How do they interact with individuals' goals and understandings? And, how consistent are those understandings with measurable social phenomena?

While these forms of research are highly situational and instrumental, they can often be empirical. Data obtained from a variety of sources can be useful in attempts at getting the social organism thinking. The availability of high-quality relevant data often dictates what is available for study and what sorts of questions can be asked. For instance, in the example in this article dealing with violent crime in Camden, NJ, archival crime data was available. The community group was additionally able to procure disaggregated crime data from the local police department that was not available to the researchers independently.⁵ Particularly valuable are data that allow the analysis of prominent factors in the social imagination—as these are more likely to be points of leverage. This means looking for dependent variables that are reflective of the realities of large numbers of people (i.e. behaviors, health outcomes, housing affordability, etc.) and processes larger than our own controlled interventions (i.e. social and political movements, population changes, etc.).

Without diminishing the importance of multivariate inferential statistical analyses to uncover relationships between variables, we suggest that if the goal is to engage the social imagination, then this form of research may be overrepresented in community research. The information produced by many such analyses is geared exclusively toward an academic audience, and the variables are often measured several steps away from inherently comprehensible phenomena. In many situations, the use of raw numbers, percentages, ideas and trends is at least as useful as rigorous multivariate statistical analyses (Tufté, 1990), with regard to getting the social organism thinking.

Finally, the mechanisms for the dissemination of information are a crucial consideration. In addition to peer-reviewed journals and scholarly newsletters, the mass media are potentially relevant outlets, especially when research is connected to daily concerns of individuals. For instance, the impact of the Pullman strike, described in the

first pages of this article, would have been greatly diminished without mass-media coverage. In the case of collaborations with local groups, correspondence with local media may be particularly effective. Another strategy consists of “arming” community collaborators with information relevant to their goals through reports and presentations.

These strategies serve as examples of the ways that community research might do more to get the social organism thinking. Strategies like these will be more effective in certain situations than in others—and specific recommendations lose relevance over time. A pragmatic orientation insists that mechanisms for achieving systems change constantly be reevaluated for effectiveness in different situations. In this way, the role of the researcher itself is an object for experimental inquiry. It remains a question: how are we, as researchers, most effective in systems change processes?

Conclusion

Systemic forces at work in public issues and private troubles such as obesity and violent crime sometimes manifest in ways that seem counterintuitive. Dealing with the complexity involved requires reconsideration of systems *and* of individual identities, as well as the relationships between the two. This way of theorizing systems and individual change (as inextricable) has wide ranging implications for the ways that we conduct research and intervene. The social imagination is a conceptual tool for advancing systems thinking for the purpose of change. Lasting systems change requires not just a redefinition of relationships or structures, but also a corresponding change in the way that the systems work in the imagination—and a corresponding alteration of potentially numerous individual identities.

These insights into the social imagination help to illuminate difficulties in achieving systems change. The systems in which we live and work (and form our “selves”) have been shaped by a long and complex history of ideas, powers and random chance. They are, however, dependent on continuing down the paths that they are currently taking—and often will only change in response to crises or threats of impending crises. At some level, the stakes of change are the very identity of individuals and institutions. Path dependence in systems is a way of understanding much of the power and some of the irrationalities of systems.

The resistance of systems to change necessitates that we critique our research and practice for its ability to potentially catalyze systems change (Lather, 1991). Processes that engage the social imagination have similarities, regardless of whether they involve scholars and profes-

⁴ See Christens and Speer (2006) for more on these critiques of the ideal of participation.

⁵ See Speer et al., (2003) for additional information on data sources.

sional practitioners. Isolating social or psychological variables for empirical study, intervening on individuals through programs, or providing ameliorative services to the disempowered are strategies that do not tend to achieve lasting systems change (Prilleltensky, 2003). This does not necessarily speak to their value in any ultimate sense—they simply do not tend to catalyze larger changes unless they are very carefully and strategically designed to do so. Systems change is not always desirable—it is, however, complex and constant. Attempts to achieve it demand attention to both processes and intended outcomes. As John Dewey understood with regard to the Pullman strike, systems change will require a challenge to and alteration of the collective imagination. In this sense, the social imagination is about power in intimate relation to knowledge and ideology (Foucault, 1972; Lukes, 1974). Our research, writing, and intervention strategies have power to achieve liberatory and transformative systems change. This is especially true when they are able to complicate matters for the social organism in ways that necessitate imaginative reworking. This growth toward greater complexity is difficult, at the individual level (Friere, 1970; Kegan, 1982) and at the social level (Flybjerg, 1998; Mills, 1959), but it is worth considering whether it might not be less difficult if the two were not theoretically abstracted from each other.

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