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Community Coalition Simulation: Experiential Learning of Community Psychology Practice Competencies

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Community Coalition Simulation: Experiential Learning of Community Psychology Practice Competencies

Community psychology (CP) practice competencies have recently emerged as a contemporary issue in community psychology (Society for Community Research and Action, 2012). One of the more challenging CP practice competencies to learn, in the experience of the authors of this paper, is *collaboration and coalition development*, listed under Community and Social Change as CP practice competency number twelve – “The ability to help groups with common interests and goals to do together what they cannot do apart” (SCRA, 2012, p. 12). This paper describes a community coalition simulation exercise as a teaching tool for CP practice competencies in both community and academic settings. Whether one is engaging in working as a member of a coalition for the first time, or, engaging in learning collaboration and coalition building as a student of CP, teaching and learning about coalition development is challenging.

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A simple coalition meeting often includes many individuals representing many different community sectors, often with different agendas. In such a complex setting, success requires good listening and responding skills, an excellent sense of group process abilities (i.e., hearing and identifying themes), organizational change capacities, and the ability to manage conflict. When all the skills, principles, theories are applied well and coalition members become genuinely engaged in the process, it can lead to successful outcomes.

Using simulations as a teaching device in community and academic settings is based on the belief that experiential learning is one of the most powerful techniques for examining and learning about complex community interventions. They can expose participants to the complicated group dynamics that occur in communities and have them play an actual role in such a situation. Coupled with guided reflection after engaging in the simulation experience, participants not only gain practice in acting to overcome differences in understanding community problems and solutions, but also gain experience in reflecting critically upon the individual and group dynamics which facilitated or inhibited collaboration. At best, the process will allow the group to work more holistically to address community issues.

This is a tool that the lead author has used over the last twenty years to train numerous groups in communities who are learning coalition building skills. In those situations it is an especially useful tool for teaching people who have had virtually no experience in coalitions. When the lead author first got involved in consulting to substance abuse coalitions twenty years ago, coalitions were a new phenomenon. Many participants and leaders of coalitions had never been in one, so simulations were needed to give them a feel for the experience. Since that time he has used

simulations to address specific training issues: sustainability, including grassroots community members in coalitions, substance abuse, violence prevention, youth engagement, impact of receiving money on a coalition’s behavior, teenagers hanging out downtown, hospital/community interaction and parent involvement in schools.

The coalition simulation experience shared in this article was developed for newly forming coalitions around youth issues in a community context. The request in the simulation was taken from an actual letter from a superintendent that had been sent to a community coalition that the first author was involved in.

Other simulations have been developed to address other specific community dilemmas.

- 1) When trying to address the issues involved in engaging real grassroots residents in coalitions we created a community coalition meeting to solve the problem that they could not get any parents involved in their youth coalition. We then held back two members of each table and coached them as parents by asking them ‘what it would feel like to be a parent joining this group of professionals?’ We then sent them into the coalition group meeting 15 minutes late without the coalition knowing who they were. In the post-simulation processing time we would then have both those playing professionals and those playing parents talk about the difficulties they encountered in the interface of residents and professionals.
- 2) To demonstrate the impact of money on coalitions. We set up coalitions similar to the one you will see in the attached simulation but more focused on the problem of youth substance abuse. After 30 minutes we came to

each table with a fax from their Congressman indicating that s/he thinks s/he can access a grant of \$300,000 for their community. What did they want to do? In the post simulation discussion they could discuss the clear impact of money on the behavior of all the players in the room.

The second author has more limited experience in working with community coalitions and has worked with three over a five year period that were all focused on the issue of children exposed to violence. While one coalition was informal and longstanding, the other two coalitions were initiated by state and federal governments and were more short-term. Recently, the second author began using the coalition simulation described in this paper in graduate school settings at both the Master's and Doctoral levels to bridge the often times difficult gap between knowing and doing. Pedagogically, the coalition simulation provides an intermediary praxis experience to raise students' awareness of the complexity of coalition building – i.e., to practice skills related to the competency coalition building, reflect on the experience immediately after it occurred, receive feedback within a safe and supportive environment, and explore how future efforts might be better informed through the experience.

Students have found the simulation exercise useful in learning not only *Collaboration and Coalition Building* but also in reinforcing competencies they had learned in previous coursework and experience - *Ecological Perspectives* and *Community Inclusion and Partnership* (CP Practice Competencies 1, 4, & 12) (SCRA, 2012; Sarkisian, et al., 2013). Through engaging in the role-play exercise, students were able to simultaneously act as a representative from a group with unique viewpoints of how problems occurred and act in a partnership toward a common goal, reinforcing reflection on how the coalition's actions could impact the larger ecosystem. As conflicts naturally arose, students were challenged to enact their value on inclusion through accomplishing a common goal. Divisions are built into the roles so conflict and historical differences set the stage for students to develop their understanding of how to work together even with little agreement on the root causes of problems. Inclusive actions, such as plans to include youth in further meetings of the coalition, or, the generation of innovative ideas, such as brainstorming the possibility of bringing in wind and solar companies to stimulate economic development, were some of the positive outcomes these simulated coalitions were able to achieve.

Community Coalition Simulation

Simulations are large group exercises in which the participants role-play various situations that can happen in the community. They are especially effective tools to illustrate key points in coalition building, community development, collaboration, and inclusion. Although they can be fun they're not designed as a game, but rather as a learning exercise. They need to be facilitated by an experienced group leader, and there **MUST** be adequate time for processing of the simulation, after it has been finished.

Instructions to Begin the Simulation

Divide the participants into sets consisting of one person for each assigned role. For the attached simulations there are 10 roles. If there is any one set with less than 10 people, very carefully remove roles that will not affect the outcome of the discussion. For example, do not remove the role of the meeting chair, but the role of the human service agency representatives can be omitted if another role represents that point of view (*See Appendix 1* for the general script and all participant roles). We have done this simulation with as many as 20 tables of ten each or as little as two groups of 8 each.

Read the following passage aloud to the entire group.

This simulation is a chance for all of us to take on given roles in a community interaction and act them out. Each of you will receive the exact same description of the community and the same community situation that you will be a part of. This situation will be the same for each player. You will, however, be assigned a unique role to play. Read this situation and your role. Then imagine what the person in your role is like; how they would sit, talk, act and behave at the meeting. Once the simulation starts, stay in the role until the simulation is over.

Giving the group 45-60 minutes is usually adequate. During the simulation, the facilitator(s) of the simulation will wander around and make sure that all the participants are staying within the parameter of the a roles, and will make sure that no one has gotten too carried away in the role and will offer assistance if groups get stuck. When the time allotted for the simulation is up, asked the large group to reconvene. Then take at least 30-45 minutes to process the experience using the questions below.

After the Simulation Process the Discussions that Took Place

Suggested questions for the process portion are related to the process of the exercise and what lessons can be learned from the experience. In academic settings, the

questions can be related to community coalition building and foundational principles of community psychology practice (i.e., Ecological Perspectives, Empowerment, Sociocultural & Cross-Cultural Competence, Community Inclusion and Partnership, and Ethical, Reflective Practice).

Questions related to the simulation exercise process.

- Did this experience feel real?
- How did it feel to you?
- What was it like for you?

Questions related to community coalition building.

- Was it easy for the person in your role to participate in the meeting?
- What were barriers to participation for the person in your role?
- What helped move the discussion?
- What dynamics of the group did you observe?
- What did you learn about coalition processes as a result of the simulation?

Questions related to foundational principles of community psychology practice.

- What ecological levels were addressed? Follow Up: Brainstorm how levels, not addressed in the exercise, could be addressed
- What is the extent to which an empowering process occurred? What promoted or inhibited this process?
- What are the ways in which an inclusive partnership was realized and/or inhibited?

- How did culture or race play a role in the dynamics of the coalition simulation?
- What is the extent to which the meeting chair enacted ethical, reflective practice?

Summary

Many community psychology practice competencies require more than just reading and discussion to help create skills. Experiential opportunities like simulations provide faculty and trainers with such a tool to help create learning experience around especially hard to learn competencies such as collaboration and coalition development skills. This article describes in detail one such tool that can be used as is or tailored to specific situations to help teach coalition building skills. This tool has been used with some success both in academic (Sarkisian, et al., 2013) and in community settings.

References

- Sarkisian, G. V., Saleem, M. A., Simpkin, J., Weidenbacher, A., Bartko, N., & Taylor, S. (2013). A learning journey II: Learned course maps as a basis to explore how students learned community psychology competencies in a community coalition building course. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 4(4), xx-xx. Retrieved from (<http://www.gjcpp.org/>)
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Appendix I

Community Coalition Simulation Scripts

The case of the Town of Dry Gulch's Coalition to Promote Community and Family Competence

The town of Dry Gulch (population 11,000) is a rural community in New Mexico. It has a history of being a mining community but in recent years the mines have closed and have been replaced with lower paying jobs and high unemployment. The area has a high rate of child abuse, teen pregnancy, substance abuse (mainly alcohol) and domestic violence.

The Superintendent of schools is concerned about the inability to engage many parents and families in the schools and in their children's education. The Superintendent has sent out a letter inviting people to a meeting to discuss the issue. He describes the issues as follows in the letter:

“Too many of our youth are growing up poorly supervised or simply with no parenting. Many of our youth become children having children. They have few parental role models upon which to lean as they assume the often-stressful parent/child relationship. Many, lacking motivation or self esteem, take the path of least resistance and make poor choices which lock them into lives of silent resignation, despair, substance abuse, etc. You know the story as well as I do. It is my belief that we need to come together and create a community response. Collectively we have more than enough brains to identify solutions or at least counter measures. I do not know how to do this job alone but I am willing to host a meeting where we can join forces to develop options which might, in the not too distant future, begin a turn around.”

The Superintendent also contacted the local Community Coalition staff that agreed to supply him some help in facilitating/running the first meeting. The meeting occurs in the conference room at the Superintendent's office and you are to follow the attached description of your role.

Superintendent

You called the meeting for the reasons stated in the letter. You are especially pleased that so many people from different community sectors accepted your invitation. You are really hopeful that they will take your appeal seriously and come up with an action plan and make commitments to help out. Too often they leave the problem in the lap of the schools without helping.

The case of the Town of Dry Gulch's Coalition to Promote Community and Family Competence

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Meeting Facilitator from the local Community Coalition

Your job is to try to keep this meeting focused. The discussion is likely to ramble. You would like people to state what their “self interest” is. You would like to help the group to:

- List their problems;
- List the root causes of the problems;
- List what they see as potential realistic solutions that could actually be accomplished;
- Finally you'd like to see what commitment they are willing to make to the effort.

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Staff Member – Health Department

You have been involved in developing prevention programs across the whole area including teen pregnancy, child sexual assault, child abuse and substance abuse. You see the Superintendent's invitation as a wonderful opportunity to bring some prevention programs to the town of Dry Gulch. You have always wanted a chance to get your programs into Dry Gulch but most of your attempts have usually been met with resistance.

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Director of Substance Abuse Services for the town of Dry Gulch

You received the Superintendent's letters and are delighted with what you see as an opportunity to work with the schools and the community on issues of substance abuse. Your agency has mainly focused on treatment and you want to see an expansion into the area of prevention. You would like to push the issue of substance abuse in this meeting so that the group focuses on your issue. You would like to have some control of what happens. You would also like to get counselors into the schools with the schools potentially paying for their services. Your agency is running a deficit so money is an issue for you.

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Director of the Dry Gulch Community Hospital

You run the hospital in the area and like many other small hospitals you are on the edge of a financial crisis. You attend this meeting out of a sense of community obligation but are not too sure what this effort really has to do with the hospital. You do have a childbirth unit, a pediatrics unit and an alcohol de-toxification unit all of which are running on low census. You wonder with this effort by the Superintendent could lead to more referrals to the hospital. Your mission is to either decide that this is not relevant or to decide that it is and that you want the hospital to play a large role in the effort. It will depend on whether the group can choose a clear focus.

The case of the Town of Dry Gulch's Coalition to Promote Community and Family Competence

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Pastor of the Dry Gulch Church

You are the pastor of the church. You are aware of many of the community trends that the Superintendent is talking about –including family disintegration, increasing amounts of substance abuse, and an increasing revelation of child abuse and child sexual assault within the families of your congregation. You feel very strongly about these issues; you want very much to see something done but you are very wary about any collaboration with the schools or the human services because in the past they have not been very responsive to you or interested in your input. You approach this meeting with a good deal of caution but a real desire to see something happen.

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Police Chief for the Town of Dry Gulch

You have been the Police Chief for over ten years and have sat in various meetings like this over the years with groups trying to get together. You don't feel like they have honored your input or the criminal justice approach in general. Your Police force would like to have an officer work in the schools on issues of substance abuse and hope that this effort might lead to some increased support in the town for funding such a position. You see your role as a watchdog, keeping other members honest and every now and then reminding them of your concerns.

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Member Dry Gulch School Committee Member

You are the Chair of the Town School Committee. You are terribly concerned about the same issues that the Superintendent has mentioned. However you feel that very often the community dumps all the problems on the schools and do not want to tackle these issues without help from agencies and the community at large. You don't want the schools blamed. You know that the kids have substance abuse problems because the parents also have problems in that area.

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Executive Director Dry Gulch Chamber of Commerce

The Superintendent is an old golf buddy of yours. He has invited you as a personal favor to come to this meeting. The Chamber represents the business interests in the community. You have been concerned about the economic downturn in the area. You are somewhat sympathetic to the issues of quality of life in the community but are to sure what role the Chamber would have in such a human service venture. You are aware that the children that the Superintendent is concerned about are part of the economic future of Dry Gulch

The case of the Town of Dry Gulch's Coalition to Promote Community and Family Competence

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Parent Representative from the Parent Teachers Organization

You are the parent of three children. Your oldest is an adolescent who has gotten into a great deal of trouble in terms of alcohol and trouble with the police. You are very concerned also about your daughter and younger son and would like to see the schools and the community doing more to help out kids like them. You resent any implication that this is your fault as a parent and are going to make sure that they don't blame it all on the parents. The Superintendent should take some responsibility for running what you see as mediocre schools and the Chamber of Commerce should take responsibility for not doing more to make sure there are decent jobs for your children.