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## A SYSTEMS PARADIGM FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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The study of and practice in communities requires a theoretic construct of an overarching conceptualization that can "sweep-in" existing paradigms; variant epistemological foundations and methodological directives for complex community development. The purpose of this paper is to identify and define the existing epistemological and methodological approaches to communities with the objective of coalescing them into a unified system of inquiry. The intent is to first raise the level of abstraction in and about a community that goes beyond the confines of any (or combined) paradigm. In so doing, one can converge a polarity of opposing positions to the study and understanding of communities. This is a social design professional activity: the arrangement of, and the processes of arranging and rearranging the human, social and technical resources of a community to achieved desired results. Secondly, a social design function builds community systems by anticipating human and social needs: developing strategies for realization and tactics for their implementation.

### I. Introduction

This paper is based on the notion that all communities, whether in post-industrial societies or less developed countries, are in process of development. The hierarchical levels of complexity in these societies are characterized by structural differentials produced by technological and political development, but the function of planned social change remains the same in all societal systems.

My contention is that community development and social change are mutually interactive processes. Communities ought to evolve towards a desired or envisioned human and societal end (desideratum) through purposeful social change. The means for its realization of an "ideal" end are continuously designed and redesigned. Hence, the social design of a community refers to the arrangement of, and the processes of arranging and rearranging its human, social and technical resources to accomplish a variety of community objectives. A progressive realization of these objectives compel the community as a system to increasingly move toward higher levels of complexity. This, in turn, requires the intermittent resetting of goals that offer new directions for the community in development. Within this context, the role of the professional as a social designer is viewed as that of a centrifugal force within a continuous process of change.

The term "communities in development" as described and defined here differs markedly from the usage of others who do not perceive it as a "centrally planned change" but rather as . . . "a non violent approach to organizing people for redressing their grievances."<sup>4</sup> This paradigmic approach advances a Parsonian system of analysis and emphasizes particularly remedial and incremental procedures. "Community in development as a social design function" is distinguished from community action, community organization, community planning and community control because it emphasizes the concept of emergence. Communities are seen as purposefully seeking desired results through a preconceived and predetermined social design. Community planning is purposive in that there are deliberately devised experimental means to pursue goals for a community. Communities in development are purposeful in that the goals are created and they emerge as the means for their realization are designed.

## II. Need for a Conceptual Perspective

Social design as a function for communities in development has now advanced to a level of knowledge acquisition and utilization that necessitates the formalization of

a theoretical construct unique to its intellectual, administrative and operational activities. This broad scope of involvement requires a theoretical construct with an overarching conceptualization that can "sweep-in" existing systems of inquiry, variant epistemological foundations, and methodological directives. Such a conceptual perspective should be easily applicable in highly complex urban areas, as well as in less "complex" rural communities.

A brief review, therefore, the major paradigms\* responsible for producing knowledge for the field of community studies will enable us to:

- (1) Identify existing patterns and traditions in research that can serve as models for community problem solving and decision making.
- (2) Describe the relationship between social change in communities with particular relevance to the role of the professional as the user of the knowledge based on these paradigms.
- (3) Provide a more creative and rational basis upon which critical decisions can be made in the selection of a particular paradigm relative to its producers (i.e., participants in a variety of spatial and temporal dimensions in which problems of communities are confronted.

Hence, the major purpose of this paper is to describe and identify the alternatives available for inquiry while simultaneously considering the feasibility of coalescing them into a unified conceptualization for a community in development. Second, the intent is to increase the level of abstraction beyond any one exclusive or combined use of these systems of inquiry in the studies of communities.<sup>2</sup> A social design for communities in development is

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\*A paradigm in this paper refers to the ontological conceptions, epistemological foundations, methodological directives found in models from which particular patterns, traditions, and practices emerge in community studies.

a function in which emerging human and social needs are anticipated and the means necessary for their realization are prescribed by a social designer. This necessitates and introduces the use of an emerging system of inquiry to provide a broader knowledge base for social and human affairs.

### III. Existing Conceptual Perspectives

Four paradigms reflecting contemporary thinking in the social sciences were selected to represent prevailing conceptual perspectives in studies of communities: scientism, adaptations in action systems, control through divergence, and planning in social experimentation. The criteria I used for the selection of these systems of each paradigm contains ontological conceptions, epistemological foundations and methodological directives.

- (1) Ontological Conceptions: Each paradigm implicitly or explicitly responds to the questions--What is the purpose for which communities exist? Is a community an expression of all the components that comprise it? Or does a community have an existence in and of itself irrespective of the parts that comprise it?
- (2) Epistemological Foundations: Each paradigm organizes its knowledge, information, resources and experiences. Must they reflect direct observable events and occurrences subject to causal analysis? Or ought they to reflect visions and experiments in heuristic articulations?
- (3) Methodological Directives: Each paradigm provides a description and explanation for the methods and techniques used that clarify and/or structure the problem (i.e., means/ends relations in causality or finality); each discloses applications of logical principles to concrete problems. Are the available means and ends known to a community in the pursuit of a problem? If not, what alternative strategies can be made available? What do communities do when the means and ends are unknown or in disagreement?

Let us now briefly examine these four paradigms:

(A) Scientism Applied to the Study of Communities

A scientific deterministic perspective is in search of knowledge predicted on the assumptions that all human and social behavior can be observed and measured and analytically appraised through the use of objective logic and pure rationality. For example, advancements made in science and technology follow specific physical and mathematical laws that can determine causation and can have replicable and predictable value. A synoptic conception: a comprehensive understanding of a community can be transferred to other communities despite idiosyncratic and subjective values inherent in the communities' cultures and social norms that comprise the foundations for their respective social institutions. In my view, this poses a challenge to the primacy of values which they are supposed to serve, especially when scientific and technological advancements are packaged in their entirety from highly advanced, let us say, industrial and urban technological centers to be applied to less developed areas.

In scientism, objectives for communities are prioritized and quantified to attain the most efficient and effective decisions necessary for their maximization. These objectives are usually decided upon statistically, through elaborate mathematical and probabilistic equations which are formulated on the basis of empirical data of past events and occurrences. Goals are determined and predictions made for social change on the basis of where the social system has been, current thought that governs conditions for classification, and the available quantifiable and mathematical tools advanced for decision-making.

Scientism in studies of communities assumes that:

- (1) All social problems can be made well structured (means/ends are known and in agreement) so that they can be solved.

- (2) Independent and dependent variables can be distinguished, measured quantitatively and controlled under experimental conditions to ensure validation of any findings in community studies.
- (3) Analytical reductionism can be used to study communities by an independent, objective analyst whose findings will be replicated and can be predicted in similar situations.

(B) Adaption in Action Systems

A Parsonian perspective proceeds on the assumption that the equilibrium of a social system is both known and attainable, no matter on what structural and functional complexity. This is an inevitable and, incidentally, a desirable prerequisite for a social system's movement towards a preferred steady state. The concept of "equilibrium," on closer scrutiny, comes to represent the selection of choices for a given composite of social values and social norms, perceived as critical for the preservation and maintenance of the social system. These sets of criteria become the basis upon which all decisions in the community are made. All decisions, it is argued, are restricted, omitted or limited to the social values established by a "community of minds." Agreement in a community of minds (known as a "Gemeinschaft" people related by a sense of mutuality, common interest, common bonds, and common destiny) produces commitments, cooperation and coordination in communities.<sup>6</sup> This view of social change in contemporary parlance has come to be known as disjointed incrementalism, comprised of serial, remedial and fragmentary decisions in social development.

Every social system, irrespective of its level of scientific or technological advancement, it is argued, must inherently possess basic functional requisits for the maintenance of its established patterns for equilibrium, the capacity for integrating external environmental value inputs for change, a structural differentiation to adapt to changing external conditions and goals necessary to preserve its perpetual existence and development.

A community, when placed in this perspective, engages in mutual interactive processes within its social system, and between its environment and members. A mutual adjustment is sought whenever the stability in and between these functional requisites is perturbed by external social ills. The functional requisites of a community are to promote and protect the social values that comprise its system. In other words, the system must maintain and preserve a status quo; restore equilibrium whenever it is perturbed by an external force through a variety of coalitions, cooptations and adaptive techniques (i.e., mediate and facilitate; adjust the individual's behavior to the requirements of the system through therapeutic diagnostic treatment modalities; and meliorate social conflicts, issues and problems through the "political" processes of bargaining, consensus and compromises of differences through agreement in a community of minds.

There are no known or agreed upon goals or objectives established for the direction or guidance of the community required in this system of inquiry. The ends of an integrative process that attains accommodation or reconciliation is perceived as more important and critical to the community than the overall purpose and function for existence. Professional activity is required only at points of dysequilibrium. Decisions are reactive to a social perturbation that precipitates action for small change:

- (1) The reaction to a social perturbation must lead to remedial actions, resulting in short-term benefits with the purposeful avoidance of any long-term commitments.
- (2) Each incremental decision, it is understood, will resolve a single perturbation as a one-time occurrence without consideration for preceding or succeeding decisions.
- (3) Participation in the processes of mutual adjustment will resolve (not solve) social perturbation for the purpose of preserving and maintaining the



system, rather than giving it direction and guidance for the future

This paradigm views ". . . The changing nature of communities as an understanding of correlates of adaption that should enable anticipation of emerging alienation problems."<sup>8</sup> The assumption is that past experiences can be mirrored into the future for preventive purposes in community planning.

### (C) Community Control Through Divergence

The knowledge produced by this paradigm assumes that conflict in social systems is ubiquitous. A multiplicity of values and diversity of interests inevitably generates a polarity of opposing positions that can only be resolved through the creation of an alternative course of action that simultaneously comprises and subsumes the diverging positions. Social change requires discontinuity with the past and can only be advanced through conflict:

- (1) There exist in all social systems legitimated authority and a political system which requires leaders to exercise authority in making critical decisions effecting community members. These "chosen few" who make critical decisions can be found whenever authority and power in the community is formally or informally distributed and exercised. They may be a bureaucratic elite who decide on the operationalization of community projects or a technocratic elite who control and decide on the information flow within and outside of the community.
- (2) Power elite in society acquire and utilize power to advance specific interests whether political, economic or professional in a conflict ridden climate of adversary relations. Communities striving for "human betterment and social progress" are realized only to the extent that the power elite sanctions them.

- (3) Conflict, power and elitism form a triadic relation in an interactive process by which community control and social change is determined. Leaders are chosen because of their power to guide and direct social programs under conditions that inevitably will generate resistance to change.

Intrinsic to this paradigm is the assumption that those who decide on the nature and quality of change in communities will be in continuous conflict with those who advance opposing ideas as to how a community ought to pursue its ends. Social change in communities is a function and process that evolves in turbulence while striving for a synthesis of diametrically opposing sets of criteria.

Social change for communities within this context is a process that generates tension; stress and strain in that change, purportedly induced by conflict, requires new patterns and relations in the social system. Conflictual relations between those who rule and those who are ruled is an endless process in which a community benefits or is victimized depending on who has authority and control over the setting of goals for social change.

(D) Community Planning in Social Experimentation

This system of inquiry produces knowledge as it learns from experience. Its use is an expression of a social system that is confronted with an unusually new, anticipated or "wicked" social problem in which social experimentation is perceived as the only alternative. Within this context, "community" is perceived as an evolving process in which a great deal of learning and knowledge building will take place to confront an original social problem for which there exists no known or agreed upon solution.

Community planning requires, therefore, learning from experience by introducing alternative courses of action to any chronic or original social problem. It becomes necessary to ascertain and appraise the

alternative courses of action most conducive to the solution of the problem on hand based on the critical variables of cost, time, performance and place of implementation. A number of intermittent social changes are anticipated in sequential development. As the professional solves partial aspects of a problem, immediate changes and modifications are instituted in the functioning of the system (i.e., how it solves its problems) and new goals are pursued in accordance with emerging and changing developments.

Social experimentation in a sequential planning process is committed to social change in:

- (1) the restructuring of the social problem, that is, the original problem takes on a different configuration in development;
- (2) the amount of knowledge and information made available, as for example, how much learning can take place in a community at any given time;
- (3) the degree to which any one alternative course of action can be efficiently and effectively operationalized, as for example, assessing the rate of technology advanced in a given community; and
- (4) the amount and quality of resources available to pursue a program or project in development -- given enough resources and time all social problems can be solved. Intrinsic to community planning in social experimentation is the possibility that the professionals and people comprising a community are not always in agreement on what comprises a "good or better" community.<sup>10</sup>

The goal for community planning is to allow the exploring of alternative courses of action so that more viable community decisions can be made in conjunction with everyday experiences in concrete applications.

The four conceptual perspectives are critical in producing knowledge for studies in and about communities:

- (1) Each paradigm has relevant application to the community social issues, problems, needs, etc., at given points in time, place and participants.
- (2) Each paradigm broadens the choice over the epistemological and methodological base to communities.
- (3) Each paradigm offers its own unique perspective of the community gestalt and its "approximation of reality."
- (4) Each paradigm can move horizontally and vertically on a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions.

Each paradigm, however, is empirically bound to approximate the current reality in describing and explaining that which exists or is bound to arise.<sup>11</sup> None of these systems of inquiry are prescriptive relative to creative action. All lack direction and guidance to move a community from an existing condition towards a planned future goal and thus are not purposefully goal oriented towards a desideratum.

#### IV. Application of Paradigm

Before proceeding with a discussion about the emerging system of inquiry for studies in communities it is appropriate to first examine the role of participants in the use of existing paradigms. The terms community organization, community action, community control and community planning are often used interchangeably. Distinctions only arise for the user\* when specific criteria are

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\*Producers are members of any perspective(s) in the natural and social sciences, professional groups and researchers. Users are clients, special interest or a community at large.

introduced, as for example, whether the term is being used to describe a process, a task, a method, etc. It seems propitious to place these terms in juxtaposition to the aforementioned paradigm and to note the following significant correlations.

(1) Community Organization as an Expression of Scientism

Choices made in the use of knowledge on behalf of a community are relative to the idiosyncratic values of the user. For example, if the user's approximation of the community's reality is an exact replication, that is structure and components parts are well ordered and specified, then the inclination is towards scientism with its logical apparatus and axiomatics.

Community organization is a logical and rational process ". . . by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders (or ranks) them, develops confidence and will to work at them, finds the resources (internal and external) to deal with them takes action in respect to them and in so doing, extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community."<sup>12</sup>

(2) Community Action as an Expression of Adaptation

If, the user's value dictates the maintenance and perpetuation of the existing community system, then the choice for usable knowledge is governed by reactive and remedial processes. The community as a social action system ". . . has both external and internal aspects relating the system to its environment and its units to each other. It can distinguish from its surrounding environment performing a function called boundary maintenance. It tends to maintain an equilibrium in the sense that it adapts to changes from outside the system in such a way as to minimize the impact of the change on the organizational structure and to regularize the subsequent relationships."<sup>13</sup>

(3) Community Planning as an Expression of Social Experimentation

If there is no clarity or agreement as to how to resolve a problem in a community and/or for its members, then the only perspective is to experiment with various alternatives. Planning involves ". . . the process of locating and defining a problem (or set of problems), exploring the nature and scope of the problem, considering various solutions to it, selecting what appears to be a feasible solution, and taking action in respect to the solution chosen."<sup>14</sup>

(4) Community Control as an Expression of Divergence

If change in communities is perceived as a process of agitation for social progress by bringing about new social structures and new social order, then the reality is approximated to be in sets of values committed to stress, strain and tension. The community both in its vertical and horizontal relations engages in adversary exchanges that are a reflection of ". . . an abiding difference of interests, a challenge to the legitimacy of community decision organization . . . and a frank acceptance of contest as a legitimate and necessary method of resolving community issues."<sup>15</sup>

In actual applications in studies of communities the aforementioned paradigms can assume the following constellations:

- (1) Each conceptual perspective can produce knowledge that is highly specialized (i.e., for community organizations, community action, etc.) but is divorced from other perspectives and from the total social wants and needs of a community.
- (2) Two or more perspectives can offer simultaneously knowledge for the "wants and social needs" of a community, but without making explicit the possible relationships that may exist between them (i.e., knowledge produced for action or planning).

- (3) Findings produced by one perspective are imposed upon others as axioms for the same community, thereby compelling a rigid polarization across perspectives toward these axiomatic conditions. The community may actually be left with no choice except to reject these conditions.
- (4) Various perspectives can produce knowledge in juxtapositions to one another so as to enhance relationships and bounds between them without involving the community or effecting its direction.

The range of choices for knowledge acquisition is contingent upon the degree and extent of involvement of the producers and users of these systems of inquiry.

Knowledge acquisition and utilization in studies on communities requires a coalescence of these alternative conceptual perspectives for the following reasons:

- (a) The range of value choices for knowledge acquisition and utilization in any one perspective is restricted, limited and liable to given sets of premises and internal referents that, taken separately, are far removed from the idealized and actualized "wants and social needs" of a community.
- (b) A coalescence approach perceives all contributors to knowledge in whatever paradigms chosen as co-producers to the understanding of a community and that their participation is interconnected and interrelated with that of others. All four paradigms have some potential validity; all must be included.

- (c) It requires that producers of these conceptual perspectives purposefully plan and coordinate their efforts in conjunction with existing as well as emerging needs and requirements of a community.\*
- (d) The producers of knowledge must commit themselves to the overarching goals of a community which give guidance and direction to their studies and community pursuits. This is the most difficult requirement, but I am assuming that agreement, at least on basic "ground rules," is possible.

#### V. An Emerging Conceptual Perspective for Social Design

With the involvement of co-producers we can begin to formulate a new system of inquiry that engages in a "sweeping-in" process of the contributions of others in knowledge acquisition and utilization for communities. It is both feasible and desirable to begin to formulate a theoretical construct that can accomplish the following:

- (1) A system of inquiry for a social design that is macrodeterministic (i.e., comprehensive to encompass a constellation of activities, programs and services in a community, organization, actions, plans and control mechanisms) performed on multiple levels of involvement (i.e., local, state and federal); and concurrently provide guidance and direction in the selection of strategies and tactics necessary for micro-level implementation.
- (2) A system of inquiry for social design that can hypothesize "ideal ends" for a community by using the empiricism of past observations and measurements both deductively and inductively derived.

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\*Because of the relationship discussed above, between paradigms and community roles or functions (organization, action, planning, and control), the involvement of all roles will help to insure the representation of all paradigms.



- (3) An inquiry for a social design that can produce the knowledge necessary for a methodology applicable to both community experientials (descriptions and explanations of existing conditions) and community experimentations (prescriptions of what ought to be).

A system of inquiry that pursues knowledge building "in and about" communities in pure rationality, adaptive processes, dialectic and social experimentation can place emphasis of "creating knowledge" for more ideal ends as well as choosing the right means to realize them. This creative activity is in juxtaposition to logic and rationality necessary for realization in specificity. The social designer is involved in human, creative, rational action in which the "being is becoming, the doing requires thinking," etc., resulting in co-producing processes that meet contemporary social needs while simultaneously pursuing "what ought to be."

Second, a social design function distinguishes in thought between different sets of inquiries, role, behavior patterns, and strategies and tactics for social change. This form of inquiry overcomes the inconsistencies of independent findings derived from different systems of inquiries used in conceptual perspectives. The social designer can move the inquiry from analytical reductionism (what each inquiry does independently) to complex synthesis (how a concrescence of these contributions to knowledge produces a new and more complex community perspective). As a result, the social designer can consolidate polarities of positions to be used in studies of communities by moving the inquiry to higher levels of abstraction and complexity.

And finally, a social design function must communicate its program for planned change to the community in such a manner that the community can transform those plans into corresponding actions which, in fact, meet the goals in the same way as the design proposed. The community must be perceived as capable and able of achieving what it wants, so that communities perceived as systems are purposefully goal oriented.<sup>16</sup> Communities still require a rational assessment of what goals have been attained. The social designer must solicit community cooperation in

self-identification expressed through participation in attaining and anticipating common pursuits; in coordinating the multiple levels of structure and processes that must be differentiated and coalesced; must constantly create organizations and institutions to fulfill the wants and needs of the community system.

## VI. Summary

A social design function and/or process is introduced as an alternative system of inquiry capable of unifying a polarity of conceptual perspectives available to the studies of communities. The social design perspective is viewed as the most advantageous inquiry for a concrescence of social experientials as it is for social experimentations. A convergence in a unified inquiry provides opportunity to describe existing conditions in concrete applications as it does for prescriptions of anticipated events in one overarching conceptualization. This encompasses not only paradigms but also the acquisition and utilization of knowledge as well as an interdisciplinary approach studies in communities. This conceptual scheme offers the professional opportunity to practice in the specificities of communities as it offers opportunity to design future systems.

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