Force Field Analysis and Action Letters

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Force Field Analysis is an approach to conceptualizing community problems and to planning actions to address those problems. It is one legacy of Kurt Lewin's action research approach to community and social problems. It can be tailored to concern prevention/promotion topics or broader community or social issues. One product of Force Field Analysis can be individual or group action letters on a social issue, addressed to community/social decision-makers. Both the Force Field Analysis process and Action Letter product are described in this document, which is written to address students directly as an assignment.

Force Field Analysis can be used as an exercise in class (one or several class meetings), or as an extended project to be completed by individuals or teams. Even if used as an individual project or paper, it is helpful to use class time for meetings of students with similar interests or topics and to ensure that students understand the approach clearly. This encourages broader thinking and more critical analysis at each step of the process.

In the format below, students meet in small groups to choose a community problem, analyze it, and choose a goal for an initiative to address it. It works through a series of group decisions, which can simulate meetings of a community group or coalition. For convenience, we address our instructions to students. Modify them as you wish for your particular class.

If you wish to use this as a class exercise in one class meeting, you will need to present an issue or problem for the class. Have them discuss each step below in student teams and report briefly to the class. You will need to lead discussion actively and keep the process moving.

Useful background readings for instructor or students are:
The Community Tool Box website: http://ctb.ku.edu
Jenkins, D. H. (1961). Force field analysis applied to school settings. In W. Bennis, K. Benne & R. Chin (Eds.), *The planning of change.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

A similar version of this essay appeared in the Instructor Manual for:
Dalton, J., Elias, M. J., & Wandersman, A. (2007). *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities* (2nd. ed.). Belmont CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
www.thomsonedu.com

FORCE FIELD ANALYSIS: A SEVEN-STEP PROCESS

This Force Field Analysis Exercise is designed as a simulation of a series of community meetings, to build skills in focused thinking, group interaction, and positive movement regarding a problem or issue of genuine concern. The process of carrying out a Force Field Analysis simulates many of the dynamics involved in actual community work. Each step below is designed for small groups of students. For instance, imagine yourselves as a community group or coalition meeting to address a community or social issue.

Step 1: Selecting a Community Problem and Context

Choose a community problem or issue of interest to the group as a whole. We suggest choosing an issue with which at least some members have direct experience or knowledge.

Choose a community problem or issue that you care about, and that you are genuinely committed to finding ways to foster positive change. If citizens' commitment to change is not genuine, community problems soon appear impossible to address. In addition, Force Field Analysis is much more fun if you choose an issue you care about!

In this project, you will focus on the problem in terms of multiple ecological levels of analysis, not merely at the individual level.

Here are some general categories of issues: illness and health, homelessness, drug abuse (including alcohol and tobacco), domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect, violence among youth, elder abuse, poverty, environmental problems, access to child care, the impact of divorce, and issues of injustice such as racism or sexism.

You may list a few possible choices, then choose one. Your final choice of community problem should be specific and tangible; for instance, binge drinking among college students.

Write your choice of community problem here.

Next, choose a community where this problem occurs. At least some members of the group, preferably all, need to be personally familiar with this community. Your team may discuss several communities if you are prepared to discuss how their differences affect the problem.

Write your choice of community here.

Step 2: Describing the Problem

Describe the community problem in specific detail. Avoid blaming individuals for the problem. The more specific you can be about the people affected by the problem, and about the community context, the better you can devise useful responses to the problem.

If possible, talk with people or groups who are experiencing the problem or affected by it in their own lives.

Write answers below for these questions:

- What is the community context of the problem? For instance, is the community rural, urban, suburban, or other? What is its racial and ethnic makeup? What age groups are predominant? Are other community qualities relevant to this problem?
- What behaviors constitute the visible aspects of the problem? When and where do these occur?
- Who is involved in or directly affected by this problem? How could those affected by the problem be described in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or other dimensions of human diversity?
- What else is important to know about the problem?

Step 3: Identifying Root Causes of the Problem

Understanding a community problem involves understanding something about its causes. A good theory of the root causes of a community problem provides a guide to efforts to prevent or lessen that problem.

"Root causes" are the most basic, most significant causes of a problem. Some may be individual factors, but others are factors at higher levels of analysis, such as organizational, locality, or macrosystem (e.g., economic and social-political factors).

To identify root causes:
- review the research and scholarly literature on causes, risk and protective factors;
- interview persons in the community, especially those who have experienced the problem directly, not just professionals;
- use the "But Why?" technique in a group or individually.

Briefly, "But Why?" begins with the community problem you defined earlier. Ask yourself: "Why does this problem occur?" Each time you identify a cause of the problem, ask yourself, "But why does that occur?" Keep asking "But Why?" until you arrive at the underlying factors that seem to be roots of the problem. Repeat the procedure as often as needed to identify the **causes of the problem at multiple ecological levels of analysis.** For more information, see Chapter 17 of the Community Tool Box website on the World Wide Web (http://ctb.ku.edu).

Use the space on the rest of this sheet to list causes of the problem, and to discuss and list root causes. Circle those you identify as root causes.

Step 4: Clarifying a Goal

From the list of root causes, choose *one* causal factor that you would like to change.

Make sure the factor that you pick is changeable, that it can be altered in a constructive way that lessens the problem in your community setting. You may eventually plan to attain this goal with a prevention/promotion program, a social policy, or another action intiative.

Write down the factor your group selected. Make it as specific as possible.

Next, write a **Goal Statement:** a description of how you would like to see this causal factor changed, to resolve or lessen the community problem.

Make your goal **feasible**: something you can imagine happening, but that also would represent a real improvement in the situation in your community setting.

Make your goal **specific**: measurable or identifiable, so that you and others will know when it has been attained.

Write your goal here.

Step 5: Identifying Driving and Restraining Forces

This step is the heart of Force Field Analysis.

Driving Forces are those that can push your community toward the goal you specified in the previous step. These may be resources such as committed persons, organizations, or funding which can help attain the goal. Driving Forces may also be intangible resources such as a shared sense of community that motivates individuals to work together. Potential driving forces can also be persons or groups who are not now involved, but could be useful in addressing the community problem. However, consider potential driving forces only if you believe that they can be mobilized readily for work on the problem. It is a very human error to overestimate the number or strength of those who agree with you or who will work with you. Be realistic.

Restraining Forces are factors that resist or obstruct movement toward the goal situation. These also may be community forces, persons, or organizations. Root causes of a problem are restraining forces. So is resistance to change, a powerful community force. Any group or person who would be threatened in some way by progress toward the goal situation may also be a Restraining Force. Those who oppose your definition of the problem or its causes may also be Restraining Forces. Essentially, Restraining Forces are the factors already present in the community that keep the problem in existence, even if only by ignoring it.

Figure 1 illustrates the relation of driving and restraining forces to the current situation and the goal.
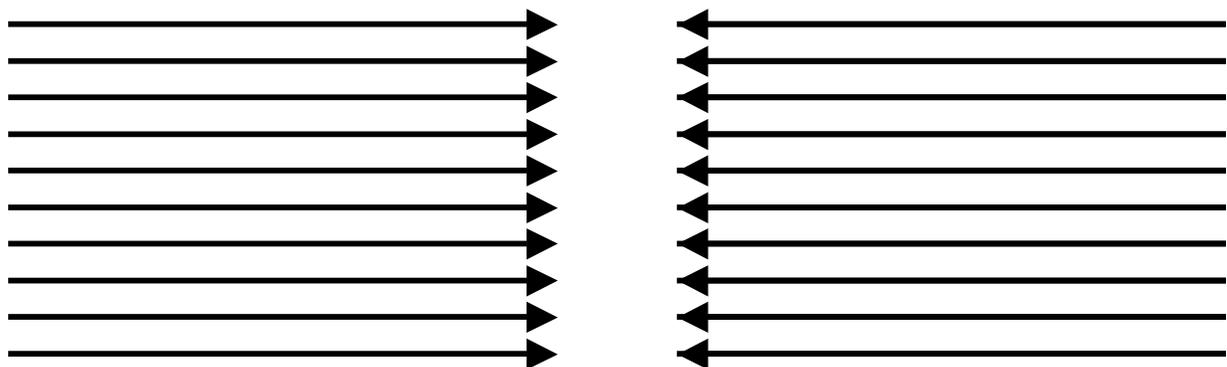
FIGURE 1: DRIVING AND RESTRAINING FORCES

CURRENT   *GOAL*
SITUATION   *SITUATION*

DRIVING FORCES   RESTRAINING FORCES

On this page, list all the Driving and Restraining Forces your group can identify concerning the community and goal you have chosen.

DRIVING FORCES   RESTRAINING FORCES

Step 6: Prioritizing Driving and Restraining Forces

Now return to the prior page and choose up to three important Driving Forces for your community to strengthen, in order to attain your goal. These will be the first focus of your action plan.   Circle your choices.

Then choose up to three important Restraining Forces for your community to weaken or work around, to attain your goal. These will be the second focus of your action plan. Circle your choices.

Step 7: Action Plan

When you have prioritized up to three Driving Forces and Restraining Forces for action, you are ready to plan a community initiative to attain your goal by strengthening these Driving Forces, weakening or working around these Restraining Forces, or doing both.

Typically, you will focus on your prioritized list of Restraining Forces. From this list, you will choose one or two of these forces that you can most feasibly reduce. Your Action Plan should describe in detail how your group intends to reduce these Restraining Forces, and thereby impact on the problem situation you identified earlier.

The first part of your Action Plan write-up is the **Action Plan Outline**. This will consist of a 1-2 page single-spaced overview of the overall plan you are proposing. This write-up should give a broad view of what you would like to see happen and how it will take place, and it should reflect a realistic timeline. Think of it as an Executive Summary, Overview, or Flow Chart. You can write it out or use outline form—whatever will allow you to best convey what you are intending.

Either in class, or out of class as a group or via electronic meeting, your group should have a chance to work together to think through this plan as a group.

Also, use the Internet or make other contacts necessary to help you determine (to the extent possible) whether something like what you have been proposing has been tried before. It's not impossible that your Force Field process might take you to some familiar solutions, but these are likely to result in first order change. So, you want to try to reassure yourselves that you are not carrying out something that has recently been tried and has been unsuccessful. Things you learn in this search process often lead to small but important modifications in plans.

The second part of the write-up consists of 1-2 paragraphs that specify the **Community Psychology Concepts** that you have integrated into your Action Plan Outline. This is a very important section, as it gives you a chance to explain principles that may underlie your Outline but not be explicit or obvious. You can draw from the textbook or any related readings for this.

The third part of the Action Plan write-up consists of the **Implementation Start-Up Details**. This will consist of a list of numbered steps that specify exactly what it will take to get your Action Plan started, making no assumptions with regard to time and resources. It takes time to set up meetings, gather resources, obtain funds, design a program, etc. Don't omit any steps; consider your group as the ones who are going to implement the plan. So if there are steps that are necessary but are things you can't accomplish directly, your plan should reflect how you are going to get the resources or support to get done what needs to happen.

As you play out these details, you may find yourself needing to revise aspects of your Action Plan Outline, particularly your timeline.   This section should be no less than one single-spaced page but no more than two pages, and it should be in numbered outline form (including

the action step, the time required, and who will do it). The reason for the two-page limit is because this is a simulation and you will get the idea about realistic action planning within 1-2 pages. You might not find yourself getting too far into your Action Outline. That's no problem. Just be sure to keep CP concepts, principles, and values in mind and don't allow yourself to compromise these in the name of expedience, just to get the plan done. Expedience is what often dooms social action plans and leads to first-order change efforts that allow problems to persist.

The next part of the write-up is the **Analysis of Obstacles**. For each step corresponding to each number of your Implementation Details, you should provide an analysis of the obstacles to it and propose ideas to get around those obstacles. If you find that there are significant flaws in your plan, or that the obstacles identified seem highly difficult to overcome, that is not a serious problem. Your realistic, honest analysis is required here. The best outcome is when you and your team, not someone else, discovers the obstacles. Realistic and creative planning around obstacles is an essential part of the Force Field Analysis process.

Finally, you should provide a brief overview of an **Evaluation of your Overall Plan**. It should address the question, "How will you know that the goals of your plan have been attained?" What will have changed to let you know that you are being successful? What indicators will be useful to you?   Here, you can look at the research methods and designs in Chapters 3, 4 and 14 of the textbook to help you figure out appropriate ways to determine whether your actions have been successful, and, in the spirit of action research, where they might be falling short and require revision/rethinking.

The Community Tool Box website is a valuable resource for this planning (http://ctb.ku.edu).

Another Product of Force Field Analysis: Individual Action Letters

Another possible product of a Force Field Analysis project is to take what one has learned and to write a brief (2 pages, double spaced) Action Letter to an appropriate person, agency, media outlet, etc., with several or all of the following goals.

- Define the specific problem or issue you are addressing.
- Illuminate aspects of a problem that have gotten too little attention. This may include causes that have been overlooked. Cite sources of specific information.
- Suggest causal factors that may have been overlooked in solutions proposed to date.
- Advocate a specific, feasible course of action to address these aspects of the issue. Examples include a new policy, new practices or ways to carry out an existing policy, or a new or modified community program. Recognize that your ideas will have costs (e.g., money, time, collaboration among groups). Advocate your course of action assertively.
- Indicate areas that you think should have more research and public discussion to analyze the issue.

Choose a person or organization you want to address; the more specific the better. Examples of places to which one might direct a letter include a newspaper (in your hometown, or the location of your university, or your college newspaper), your representatives or senators in the state legislature or the U.S. Congress, someone at your university, someone at a relevant state agency, the editor of a magazine, the head of a corporation or business, a philanthropy or foundation, or the writer of one of the source materials you read for the project. You are free to quote from class readings, to acknowledge that your work arose out of the work of a group in your class, and to take a forceful position.

If you have worked on a group project related to your letter, coordinate your letter plans with other group members. That may involve several different letters to the same person, or letters to several different persons. Most problems have many stakeholders. If several people write to the same person, take different "angles" so that your work will be complementary, not repetitive.

You are not obligated to send the letters, but each one should be sendable.