

The Role of Community Psychologists in Understanding the Digital Divide

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

February 2014

The Role of Community Psychologists in Understanding the Digital Divide

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For years we have known that economic success and advancement of individuals and thus communities is intricately tied to “information tools, such as the personal computer and the Internet” (**The U.S Department of Commerce: National Telecommunications & Information Administration’ (NTIA) report, 1995**). More Americans than ever have access to telephones, computers, and the Internet. At the same time, however, NTIA has found that there is still a significant “digital divide” separating American information “haves” and “have nots.” What is the role of the community psychologist in bridging this gap?



The most obvious principle of community psychology that applies to reducing the space between the “haves” and “have nots” in the realm of the digital divide is **Empowerment**. According to Julian Rappaport, empowerment is a positive approach to helping those who have fewer resources, both tangibly, in terms of money and power and psychologically, in terms of confidence and a sense of efficacy. The concept suggests the importance of both individual determination over one’s own life and democratic participation in the life of one’s community, often through mediating structures such as schools, neighborhoods, churches, and other voluntary organizations. Empowerment conveys both psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighborhoods; it suggests the study of people in context.

Community psychologists are positioned to create next steps for implementation of programs aimed at minimizing the digital divide into communities. For example, a community psychologist can facilitate the engagement of community members in technology by utilizing existing in-person peer-to-peer support group models based on the principles of adult learning and family support. These programs are strengths based and provide a gateway to parent leadership opportunities. One such model is **Parent Café** created by Be Strong Families/Strengthening Families Illinois. Parent

Café is aimed at supporting programs and communities in engaging parents, building protective factors, and promoting deep individual self-reflection. Inspired by parent cafes, the first author designed a peer-to-peer support group model aimed at community engagement in technology called **Café Technology**. Café Technology is designed to engage community members in peer-to-peer conversations about computer usage, applications, stresses and successes. Café Technology encourages a discussion of individual resilience and flexibility when learning about computers, the value of technology and its role in communication, how searching the internet is both instinctual and learned and the fact that everyone needs help when using software/applications at some time. Café Technology can go on for 15 minutes or an hour. It's up to the group. There are no formal rules to Café Technology, but there are some agreements for participants including: 1) speaking from one's own experience (using "I" statements), 2) listening attentively without interrupting and 3) not speaking negatively about oneself or others. Although technology may not seem to be a sensitive topic, it can tap into insecurities. It is suggested that "Vegas rule" be applied-- what happens in Café Technology, stays in Café Technology. Preliminary research on the impact of Café Technology on community members is being considered.

Utilizing a model like Café Technology in Community Technology Centers is likely to be more effective than models outside of the community. CTC's are part of a federal initiative that acknowledges the role of community-based organizations and non-profits in delivering access to basic and advanced telecommunication services. More specifically, CTC's provide access to information technology and related learning services to children and adults in their community setting. CTC's face challenges such as unfunded mandates and low turnout of residents. Community psychologists can play a role by engaging communities through Participatory Action Research, perhaps by using Café Technology chats in an effort to identify ways of creating greater community interest. This empowerment process, along with advocacy efforts aimed at funding mandates, can increase utilization and pave the way to advancement and economic success of both individuals and their communities.

There are many potential roles for community psychologists in the area of the digital divide. **Community Technology Centers (CTC's)** are communities themselves that work most effectively when they balance sense of community and empowerment. Community psychologists can work with content experts and community members to develop a curriculum for CTC's tailored toward meeting community members "where they are" with regard to computer skills, and psychological baggage related to technology. CTC's are increasing across the country yet for them to be effective there is a need for curriculum that is tailored to the needs of each community and its members.

Given that limited research has been found on community psychologists work with CTC's, the first author has conducted exploratory interviews with six Community Technology Center Coordinators to assess how to develop curriculum that meets community members needs in CTC's. Formative review of the interviews revealed a few interesting points. Prior to any formal class offerings, community member's computer skills are always assessed. If the assessment is passed, they may enter the formal class. However, if the assessment is not passed, "sit-downs" are held with community members to prepare them for the assessment. The assessment process

can provide the opportunity to meet community member's needs, but for those who have trouble taking assessments, or even reading, this could act as a barrier. For instance, some members have low literacy and are visual learners; the extra work needed to pass an assessment goes above and beyond what they would need to become literate with computers. Another interesting although not unexpected formative finding is that CTC coordinators report that it is harder to work with elderly.

There are clearly opportunities for community psychologists to help facilitate an empowerment process by working with CTC's and community members, perhaps through Café Technology, to ensure even the most disadvantaged communities have the information tools necessary to advance and have the opportunity for personal and economic success at both the individual and community levels.

This is part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.