Goals

Community psychology and other ecologically-oriented psychologies strive to understand reciprocal relationships between individuals and their social contexts. But research is often hampered because we know less about assessing features of communities, organizations, and other extra-individual units than we do about assessing individuals. This course aims to challenge students to think rigorously and creatively about assessing contexts and transactions between people and contexts. Efforts at ecological assessment may include aggregating individual attitudes or characteristics (e.g., measures of the perceived environment, census data), measuring theoretically important features of ecological units directly, and assessing transactions between people and environments (e.g. social regularities, person-environment fit).

Overview

We begin by discussing theories about the relationship of people and contexts. Next we take a brief foray into psychometrics, examining reliability and validity of measurement for both quantitative and qualitative assessment methods. Psychometrics texts tend to be written from the perspective of individual assessment, but we will attempt to relate the techniques to ecological problems. Then we survey selected examples of ecological assessment at levels organized by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, while students develop, pilot, and refine their own assessment strategies.

Prerequisites

Doctoral standing (or permission of the instructor) and previous courses in research methods and statistics.

Assignments and Grading

There are six written assignments for the course. The draft assessment strategies should also be presented orally in the class in which they are due. (Please make enough copies of appropriate handouts.) The ecological construct papers will not be graded. The last four assignments and class participation will be counted approximately equally in the final grade.

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<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>9/14, 9/21, 9/28</td>
<td>Ecological construct papers (choose 2 of 3 dates)</td>
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<td>10/19</td>
<td>Psychometric test (take-home given 10/12)</td>
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<td>10/26, 11/2, 11/9</td>
<td>Draft assessment project 1</td>
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Assignments

Ecological construct papers.

For two of the first three classes, use one or more of the readings to help you clarify an ecological construct in a research context that interests you. Discuss how the construct relates to the theory, and (very briefly) how you might measure it. For example, would you use questionnaires, observations, archival data, and/or manipulations? Please make copies for all class members and be prepared to present your thoughts briefly in class. Suggested length: 1 single-spaced page.

Psychometric Test. This will be done as a take-home.

Draft Assessment Project Parts I and II. (Pick the earlier due dates if you want earlier feedback.)

Choose any problem that involves the assessment of contexts or of transactions between people and contexts. It is fine to use an ecological assessment problem that you are dealing with for some other purpose, for example your MA thesis. If you have any question about the appropriateness of your topic, see me. Develop two different approaches to assessing the context or transactions. It is fine to use one approach that focuses on the context and another that focuses on transactions between people and the same context. Approaches may differ in the types of data used, the theoretical grounding for the approach, etc., but they should be recognizably different. See me if you have any doubts.

Write up the two approaches separately for the different due dates. (These are the two parts of the project.) Each report should briefly describe the theoretical/conceptual background and the constructs you are attempting to assess (one page), and describe your approach to assessment more thoroughly, e.g., describe the sampling strategy, describe the measures (include the interview schedule or data coding scheme as an appendix), discuss issues of reliability and validity, describe plans for analyzing the data. You do not need to carry out the assessment at this stage. Present your instrument in class (with copies of handouts for everyone), and hand in one report by each due date. Suggested length for each report: 4-8 double spaced pages plus instrument.

Final Assessment Project

Revise both of your draft assessment methods on the basis of feedback from the class and pilot test them. See me before using any method that involves human subjects -- you will need appropriate permissions. Collect only enough data to get a feel for your instruments. This may be a two-stage pilot in which you try an instrument, make revisions, and try again.

Hand in: a description of how you piloted your assessment methods and how you used results of the pilot test(s) to evaluate and further revise them. Are you satisfied with the methods in their current state of development? Why or why not? If you are not satisfied, what more would you need to do to make you happy with them? Compare and contrast the sorts of information that you can learn from each assessment approach. The appendix should include your draft assessment report, copies of the instruments or description of the assessment method as of the time when you started the pilot test, along with any subsequent revisions. Suggested length: 4-8 double-spaced pages, plus appendix.
**Course Schedule and Readings**

9/7  Introduction: What is ecological assessment?

9/14  Concepts of Ecology and Ecological Assessment I


9/21  Concepts of Ecology and Ecological Assessment II


9/28  Concepts of Ecology and Ecological Assessment III


10/5  
Reliability


10/12  
Validity (pick up psychometrics quiz)


10/19  
Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research (Quiz due)


11/9 Microsystems: Neighborhoods, Workplaces (draft assessment project II)


11/16 Helping microsystems (draft assessment project II)


11/23 Peer microsystems and exosystems (draft assessment project II)


11/30 Mesosystems (plus some mediators and moderators) (draft assessment project II)


12/7 Macrosystems


12/15 Final assessment project due by 5 p.m.