Constructing “Happiness” through the Lens of Participatory Processes

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How can participatory action research improve community prosperity and happiness among residents? An initiative in Lake County, California, the Happiness Index Project (HIP), aims to explore community prosperity beyond economic factors, increase political efficacy among residents, and develop socially and culturally responsive community interventions. Located in the northern region of California, Lake County presents a promising context to understand community prosperity due to its diverse residential population and abundance of natural resources. Although the county has a relative high number of residents with a high school diploma, many residents do not hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher, and the percentage of residents living in poverty is higher than the state’s average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

An established tradition in the field of community psychology is employing methods that engage stakeholders in framing challenges and issues their organizations, communities, and localities face. The Happiness Index Project (HIP) in Lake County provides a practical example of using competencies in community psychology and participatory processes to engage residents in decision-making regarding positive outcomes for their community and neighborhoods. Dr. Ogley-Oliver, a community psychologist and assistant professor at Marymount California
University, is integral to the HIP and uses several competencies and principles in community psychology:

- **Empowerment**—Community meetings, specifically the development of a Community Advisory Group (CAG), created opportunities for residents to define the scope of the project and address issues of power and exclusion. The CAG has served as a bridge between organizations, residents, initiatives within the county, and promoting resource sharing among populations and interest groups. An assessment after the initial Town Hall meeting revealed attendees were older than the average Lake County resident, White, and, more importantly, happy about living in the county. Missing voices at the table were less affluent, non-White, and potentially less happy residents.

  The CAG worked to identify unheard voices in an effort to increase participation from parties that would not otherwise have a forum to voice their opinions (i.e. people experiencing low socioeconomic status, the elderly, youth, people living with a disability, people from minority ethnic and racial groups, etc.). The CAG efforts involved conceiving a Youth Photovoice project to tap into youth residents’ perceptions of community prosperity. The CAG became essential in connecting with possible youth co-researchers so that they could share their opinions—Dr. Ogley-Oliver has spent the last seven months working with a local high school to use photovoice to collect data.

- **Community Inclusion and Partnership.** Using the CAG to identify articles and reports that provide evidence related to community prosperity, quality of life, happiness, and well-being, was an important process to allow stakeholders to adapt previous research to the values and culture of Lake County residents. Moreover, the HIP convenes local higher education institutions, community residents, and the Wellville Initiative to work towards
a common goal of improving the county’s well-being. Through the Wellville Initiative, Lake County was selected as one of five counties across the United States to develop initiatives to improve health and well-being.

- **Participatory Community Research.** Through meetings with a member of the Lake County Board of Supervisors and university administrators, Dr. Ogley-Oliver advocated for the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a means to engage residents in developing community assessments. The CAG will aid in data collection and analysis efforts and the development of programs and policies guided by research efforts. The use of participatory processes was also important in identifying missing voices in the HIP, for example, youth. The HIP aims to identify funding opportunities for future iterations of photovoice in Lake County to allow more youth to share their perception of community prosperity and propose ideas for positive social change.

- **Small and Large Group Processes.** A kick-off Town Hall meeting incorporated large group processes to create a fertile ground for sustained involvement in framing community prosperity beyond economics. Since then, small group processes across various stakeholder groups have cultivated additional interest with an eye toward ensuring diverse participation related to planning community well-being initiatives in future years. Although initially conceived by an elected official, numerous Lake County groups and residents have contributed to the project. This project has grown due to consistent engagement among high school students, teachers, college professors, non-profit leaders, health consultants, and elected officials, which fosters a collective voice in identifying stakeholder needs and valuing similar and different perspectives.
Developing collaborations to build residents’ engagement in the project and promote sustainability presents some challenges. For one, facilitating the inclusion of diverse stakeholders occurs over time and involves transitioning members from a state of awareness about an issue to a point of social action. A few key lessons emerged over the early stages of the project:

- **The challenge of reconciling stakeholder views.** Stakeholders’ views are valuable, yet these can change as old members disengage from the CAG and new members enter. Points of tension may exist when new members are acquainted with the history of the CAG and have their own ideas and perspectives.

- **The need to gain funding support.** Similar to numerous projects of this magnitude, funding is beneficial and can provide stipends to CAG members and participating youth and teachers involved in the photovoice project to reward and sustain resident involvement.

- **The value of creating a reward system for youth participation.** Establishing partnerships with area universities or colleges for youth to acquire college credit for research or professional development would strengthen youth involvement and help youth achieve their educational goals beyond high school.

- **The value of early engagement of community leaders.** Recruiting community leaders early in the project, from initial planning to implementation, will foster a strong sustainability plan.

- **The value of building a web portal.** Using technology to create a web space for stakeholders to access documents for easy referencing and promote engagement through an online repository may serve as an important tool for real-time and virtual resource sharing.
The Happiness Index Project (HIP) represents a sequence of participatory processes. Integrating multiple partners in framing and designing the project led to presenting qualitative and quantitative data on how residents perceive their experiences in Lake County at the first Town Hall meeting. Afterwards, the Community Advisory Group (CAG) emerged to serve at the forefront in evaluating the goals of the project, advocating for the inclusion of multiple voices, and bridging other partners in the county. Collaboration with CAG will be integral in developing an actual happiness index through additional data collection and analysis. Outcomes will include using the CAG to generate recommendations and decisions about project and policy proposals and to design community-level interventions.

The HIP continues to unfold, bringing new ideas, rewards, and challenges. Through this work, constructing “community happiness” through participatory processes and the lens of community psychology may improve a sense of community among residents, but also improve political efficacy among residents in the county—ultimately, aid in the development of a model for participatory community development.

References