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Conducting Research on the Campus Community in a Community Psychology Course

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I teach a course on community psychology at a branch campus in rural Pennsylvania. This course enrolls about 30 students and meets once a week for 2 1/2 hours. When I planned the course, I felt it was important to provide students with the opportunity to conduct empirical research. In doing this however, I had to consider a number of issues. First, while Community Psychology is an upper-division course, most of the students who take it are sophomore psychology majors or minors, and most of the minors are associate degree, nursing or rehabilitative science majors. Almost none of the students have had coursework in statistics or research methodology. Second, I wanted to expose students to a variety of research experiences, but I also wanted the course to remain focused on the study of community psychology's basic concepts. Third, I wanted the research to be conducted in a single setting so that the results of the various methods could be compared. I also needed it to take place in a community setting, but it seemed unlikely that I could find a setting which would allow 30 untrained students to come in and conduct research. I was able to resolve these issues by designing a series of relatively simple empirical assignments which asked students to conduct an assessment of their own college community. These assignments not only introduced research methodology but also gave students a chance to apply basic community psychology principles.

During the first five weeks of class, students were introduced to several important concepts in community psychology: ecology, diversity and cultural competence, sense of community, and action research. For each concept, they were assigned in-class and take-home exercises that applied the principle to an empirical assessment of their own campus community. Each of these exercises utilized a different research methodology for conducting the assessment: personal experience, archival research, interviews, surveys, meetings with community leaders, and focus groups. As part of writing up each exercise, students were asked to discuss what they saw as the strengths and limitations of using a particular methodology to conduct research on the campus community. After all of the exercises had been completed, students prepared an overall assessment of the campus community, using the data they had collected in the exercises. Below, I describe each of the individual exercises and the overall assessment. I also discuss the feedback I got from students on these assignments, both from the assignments themselves and course evaluations. Overall, students reported that they "learned a lot" from these assignments, not only about community psychology, but also about their own campus.

Studying Ecology Using Personal Experience and Archival Research

I opened the course with a discussion of the ecological perspective. Students were asked

to analyze their own experience using an in-class exercise based on Kelly's four ecological principles (Trickett, Barone & Watts, 2000). After I described each principle, they answered a series of questions which assessed their own experiences with the campus according to that principle. For example, for interdependence, students were asked "what kinds of interactions do you have with other students? With faculty and staff? How frequent are these interactions? How do you feel about these interactions? Would you like to see changes in the interactions you have on campus?" After assessing their experience using each of the four principles, students were asked to discuss the question "do you feel like there is a good fit between you and the campus? Why or why not?" They then wrote a response to the question "what are the strengths and limitations of using your own experience to determine the ecology of the campus?"

As a follow-up to this ecology exercise, a take-home assignment asked students to go to the campus Web site and using only what they could learn about the campus from the Web site, to describe the campus ecology using Kelly's principles. They were required to use specific examples from the Web site to support their description. Questions for this assignment were adapted from an exercise in the text *Community Psychology: Linking Individuals and Communities* (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001, p. 150). For example, to assess interdependence, they examined the Web site to answer the following, "who are the participants in this setting? How are the setting participants interdependent? How frequently do they interact? What types of interactions do they have?" After they had completed their description, students were asked to discuss the question "what are the strengths and limitations of using archival research to determine the ecology of the campus?"

Students had generally very positive reactions to the in-class exercise on their personal experience, finding it helpful in understanding Kelly's principles. The archival research on the other hand, was perhaps the most challenging assignment for the students, and the least popular (although still evaluated positively). It appeared that they had some difficulty with translating the Web site data into Kelly's principles. In hindsight, I think it would have been helpful to have done some work with them in class on the assignment. However, in spite of this drawback, students did report learning a number of new and useful things about their campus in exploring the Web site.

Studying Diversity Using an Interview

The next class session addressed the issue of diversity. As part of this session, the facilitator for a campus program on racism came to class and spoke about her experiences with diversity issues of campus. As a take-home assignment, students were asked to interview another student (not in the class) who differed from themselves in terms of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or age. The interview used the same questions on ecology used for the in-class exercise on Kelly's principles. The student then wrote a paper discussing the differences and similarities they found between their own answers to the in-class exercise and those of their interviewee. They also discussed the question "what are the strengths and limitations of using an interview to determine the ecology of the campus?"

In writing their overall assessments, students reported that this interview was an especially useful source of information, although in the course evaluation they reported that they learned more from doing some of the other forms of research. In particular, they appreciated the rich nature of the qualitative data provided by both the interview and the focus group (discussed below).

Studying Sense of Community Using a Questionnaire

For the class on sense of community, the director of student affairs and the president of student senate came in to class and shared their thinking about the sense of community on campus. Students researched this issue by handing out a sense of campus community questionnaire to fellow students. This questionnaire was adapted from a neighborhood cohesion measure developed by Buckner (1988). For example, the item “overall, I am very attracted to living in this neighborhood” was changed to “overall, I am very attracted to attending this campus.” After reviewing the four elements of sense of community described by McMillan & Chavis (1986), an in-class exercise asked students to examine the questionnaire items to see if they could be considered effective measures of the four elements.

While reviewing the questionnaire assignment, I briefly explained the importance of achieving a representative sample. We discussed what a representative sample for this study should look like, and the students decided that race, gender and age were important variables to consider. Each student was responsible for administering 3 two-page questionnaires, for a total of about 80 participants. To obtain a roughly representative sample, students were assigned responsibility for obtaining specific categories of participants based on the percentage of their representation on campus (for example, 60 of the participants were to be female.) Students were shown how to calculate frequencies and were asked to bring in their completed questionnaires with summaries of their frequencies the following week. In class, the data was combined and overall frequencies and means were calculated. Students were then asked to write a short paper discussing what the questionnaire results told them about the sense of community at the campus and the strengths and weaknesses of using a questionnaire to study this issue.

This was a very successful exercise. Overall, the students did a very nice job of interpreting the questionnaire data, and student evaluations uniformly reported that they had learned a great deal from doing the questionnaire.

Studying Action Research Using a Focus Group

As part of the class on action research, students learned about using focus groups for needs assessment. They were given a handout adapted from *The Community Toolbox* (Berkowitz, 2001) to assist them in conducting their own focus groups. In class, students discussed who the campus stakeholders were, and then in small groups, worked to develop a set of focus group questions to assess the current needs and concerns of the campus community. Each group designated two people to take notes and two people to facilitate the focus group sessions. They then conducted hour-long focus group sessions during the next class meeting, using student volunteers as focus group members. In their write-up of this exercise, students were asked to describe the patterns and themes that had emerged in the focus group session. They were also asked what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses of using this method to assess the campus community.

Although overall, students reported learning a great deal from this exercise, there was a more mixed response to it in comparison to the other exercises. Some students loved doing the focus groups and reported that it was the most useful thing they had done during the semester. Others felt the groups had not gone well. To insure a more positive response overall, I would add a few things to this exercise. First, the focus groups would have been more informative if

staff and faculty were also included. Second, I would hold a meeting with the focus group leaders to explain in more detail how to facilitate a focus group. Third, I would give the students some time in class to discuss their findings with each other.

Writing an Overall Assessment of the Campus Community

After all of these exercises were completed, students wrote an overall assessment of the campus, making use of all the data they had collected in the research assignments. They were allowed to write this assessment alone or in a group of two or three. Students were instructed to use only the data they had gathered from their research and to use specific examples to support their discussion. They were asked to report what they saw as the assets, resources and needs of the campus. They were also asked to describe the sense of community on campus and to assess the person-environment fit. A final question asked them to discuss which research method(s) had been the most useful in assessing the campus, and they concluded the assessment with a set of recommendations for improving the campus community. They were required to submit all of the assignments with the assessment, so that I could confirm their interpretations of their data.

The overall assessment was quite successful. It was very interesting to read what the students had learned about the campus from their research, and they had some excellent observations and suggestions to make. They also did well with using their data to draw conclusions. In the course evaluations, students rated the assessment quite highly, seeing it as one of the most useful things they had done during the semester. In the future, I would like to see them have the opportunity to share their reports with the campus administration.

Conclusion

Overall, I felt this series of empirical assignments was a very effective tool both for introducing students to research methodology and for teaching community psychology concepts. In spite of their lack of experience with conducting research, the students did an admirable job of collecting and interpreting the data. An additional benefit of this set of assignments was that students learned more about their campus. Conducting this research even motivated some class members to become more involved in creating social change on their campus.

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