The Community Psychologist as Social Planner

Designing Optimal Environments[1]

Ralph Catalano[2] and John Monahan[2]
University of California, Irvine

The environmental movement may provide a vehicle by which community psychologists can contribute to large-scale ecological change. This paper uses one outgrowth of the environmental movement — the environmental impact assessment process — to illustrate the procedures for input by community psychologists and the nature of their potential contribution. Community psychologists can participate in the enviormmental impact assessment process to (1) predict the effects of any new project on the demand for treatment services and (2) suggest ways in which a project may be designed to prevent psychological problems and enhance community well-being.

Community psychology has recently been defined by Zax and Specter (1974, p. 3) as "an approach to human behavior problems that emphasizes contributions made to their development by envirönmental forces as well as the potential contributions toward their alleviation by the use of these forces." This strong environmental or ecological bias is shared by others in the field (e.g., Kelly, 1966; Monahan, 1974).

Despite the theoretical commitment to an ecological position, few community psychologists have actually engaged in large-scale interventions in the natural enviornment. It is now widely recognized that the community mental health and community psychology movements have so far not lived up to their initial mandate to prevent psychological disorder through environmental change (Cowen, 1973).

This brief paper explores one way in which community psychology can go beyond providing old services in new settings to meaningfully and perhaps

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[1] Dr. Catalano is an urban planner, and Dr. Monahan a community psychologist.
[2] Requests for reprints should be sent to either author at the Program in Social Ecology, University of California, Irvine; Irvine, California 92664.

dramatically induce change in the physical and social environment. The approach involves creatively applying community psychology to the political task of environmental management. The "environmental movement," with its broad base of political support, may provide community psychologists the long-awaited opportunity to effect environmental change for the psychological well-being of the population. More specifically, the environmental impact assessment process will be used as an example of a management device lending itself to participation by community psychologists. The process itself will be described and the benefits of participation surveyed.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Several new management strategies have been devised by the public sector to ensure that more than just economic variables are considered in the design of public and private projects with the potential to affect human health and safety. Among the more controversial of these is the environmental impact assessment process currently pursued by the Federal government and several states, including California, Massachusetts, and Florida. This assessment process has provided an opportunity for the community psychologist to anticipate changes in the demand for service and to intervene in the design process itself. To demonstrate how this potential can be realized, we will consider the assessment process in California.

Using the Federal legislation as a model, California structured its assessment process around a collection of technical reports describing a proposed project's likely impact on the natural environment, human health and safety, and the demand for public services. This collection of assessments, or Environmental Impact Report (EIR), as it is referred to, becomes the primary source of information upon which the local decision maker approves, disapproves, or requires changes in the design of a project.

The decision to prepare an EIR, its preparation, and its use as a data source for the official with responsibility to make the ultimate judgement on the project are all part of the assessment process in which the community psychologist has the prerogative to intercede. The actual functions performed by local (muncipal and county) governments and overseen by the agency charged with making the ultimate decisions are as follows:

1. Determining if the proposed project is likely to have a significant enough effect on the natural or human enviomment to justify the cost of preparing an EIR. If so, its preparation is undertaken.
2. Reviewing the preliminary EIR. The sufficiency of the data included in the EIR is usually assured by making all preliminary EIRs available for

review by any interested agency. If an agency feels the impact on its interests has been inaccurately or inadequately described, it can register its objections with whoever is responsible for preparing the EIR (usually the agency which will make the final approval or disapproval of the project, e.g., building commission, highway commission).

3. Certifying the final EIR as adequate. After the objections collected in the review process are either resolved or added to the EIR, the document is certified as adequate and forwarded to the decision maker who must grant or deny permission to proceed, or require changes in the project.

It should be noted that the EIR is only an informational document. A finding of significant adverse enviornmental impact does not bind a decision maker to deny a project. In theory, he or she must weight the EIR's findings against other "goods," such as added employment, and make the decision on total benefits accrued after costs. How representative his or her weights or values are of community sentiment will determine how effective the EIR process is in bringing the community's environment in line with its ecological goals.

POINTS OF INTERVENTION BY COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGISTS

Community psychologists can participate in the process described above in either of two ways. The first opportunity is afforded by the state's mandate that any public agency serving an impacted area has the right to participate in the review of any EIR (step 2) prior to certification of adequacy and before the decision to approve or disapprove a project is made. This type of participation places the burden on the mental health agency to ensure its assessment of the proposed project is included in the EIR. This means constant, potentially costly, monitoring of the pending decisions of several regulatory and permit-granting agencies.

An alternative mode of intervention, available in many jurisdictions, allows the agency earlier and potentially more effective participation. California, for example, has allowed local jurisdictions to appoint committees of experts which facilitate the assessment process by performing any or all of the functions listed above. A recent survey (Catalano & Reich, 1974) has found that cities and counties make wide use of such committees, especially in deciding if an EIR is needed (step 1) and in the review process (step 2). These committees usually include representatives of any local agency expressing a desire to participate. Since membership on these committees also usually means early participation in the process, it allows more influence in shaping recommendations. Where such

special committees exist, it is obviously in the best interest of community mental health agencies to insist on membership.

It should also be noted that individual community psychologists can influence local environmental decision making by participating as citizens in the impact assessment process. Public hearings afford the opportunity for concerned community psychologists to question the adequacy of EIRs which ignore issues of psychological impact.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGIST

Given that the opportunity for participation by community psychologists in the environmental impact assessment process is present, the substance of that participation must be addressed. There are two obvious contributions a community psychologist can make to assessing the effects of a project on the social and psychological environment of a community: (1) predicting the effects of the project on the demand for treatment services, and (2) suggesting ways in which the project may be designed with a view to the prevention of psychological problems and the enhancement of community well-being.

The Demand for Treatment Services

It would be rare that a major public or private project did not have an effect on the demand for psychological services and the type of services demanded. The more people living in a given area, the greater the absolute number of psychological casualties that will be found in that area, and the more the type of person in a given area changes, the more the services necessary to meet his or her psychological needs will also change.

The authors, for example, both live and work in Irvine, California, the nation's first self-governing "new town." The city currently contains 28,000 residents, and planning estimates of the ultimate population range from 400,000 to over 700,000 over the next 20 years. The land on which the city rests is owned entirely by one corporation (the Irvine Company) and all proposals for new housing developments must be accompanied by an EIR. Clearly, this drastic increase in population will have tremendous impact on the demand for all forms of social service. The demographic profile of the community will also substantially determine the kind of services which will be required. The composition of the city is and probably will continue to be skewed in a youthful direction, with substantial numbers of couples with small children. The greatest demand, therefore, will likely be in the area of child services, including school consultation.

To give a more dramatic example, the Irvine Company recently completed a survey of the type of people residing in their various housing and apartment complexes. In one large upper-middle-class apartment complex, they discovered that 65% of the residents were divorced women with small children. This is a staggering figure, even by Southern California standards. The implications of this finding for the provision of psychological services (especially day care) to this segment of the community are immense.

Other projects may have very different effects on the physical and social environment of a community. A new freeway from a city to the suburbs may result in a decrease in population for the city, since it would be more feasible for some city residents to move their families to the suburbs and commute to the city to work. The development of a retirement village in one's community has very different implications for the types of service demanded than does the growth of a community with young children. Other projects may imply an increased need for minority or Spanish-speaking professionals.

The community psychologist reviewing an environmental impact statement could comment on the implications of the project for mental health service demands. This increased or changed demand (with its associated costs) could be figured into the decision matrix in making a judgement on the relative worth of the project. The community psychologist would also have early knowledge of future changes in the nature of the population he or she is to serve.

Design for Prevention

While the provision of direct service to those in acute need is a moral imperative for the mental health professional working in the community, one of the key characteristics of the community orientation in psychology is its emphasis on the *prevention,* rather than the treatment, of psychological disorder. Partaking in the environmental impact process can put the community psychologist in a powerful vantage point from which to affect the ecological conditions conducive to psychological maladaptation. It can also allow him or her to fashion a set of ecological conditions conducive to the positive development of community strengths.

The assumption here is not one of simple environmental or architectural determinism. One need not agree with Ortega y Gassett, who said "Tell me the landscape in which you live and I will tell you who you are," in order to be concerned with the physical makeup of the environment. Michaelson (1970) has posited an "intersystems congruence theory," in which physical settings in themselves do not determine behavior, but if the settings are congruent with the goals of those who occupy them, they will provide support for the behaviors necessary to realize those goals.

The rapidly growing field of environmental psychology (Craik, 1973; Insel & Moos, 1973; Ittleson, Proshansky, Rivlin, Winkel, & Dempsey, 1974) could not have come at a more opportune time for the community psychologist interested in large-scale environmental planning. Monahan (1975), for example, has used the literature on environmental psychology to propose new strategies for the prevention of acts of violence in the community, and Krasner and Ullmann (1973, pp. 329–359) have attempted to wed environmental psychology and behavior modification into a comprehensive psychology of "behavior influence." Tools for the assessment of attitudes toward ecological issues are becoming increasingly available (White, 1966; Maloney & Ward, 1973).

The community practitioner conversant with the literature in environmental psychology could input cogent information during the environmental impact process on the potential effects of noise on the educational functioning of children, for example.

Long-term effects of noise were studied by Cohen, Glass, and Singer (in press) using elementary school children whose apartment complex was subjected to heavy traffic noise. They found that auditory discrimination was related to reading ability, and that the noisiness of the home environment was related to the ability to make auditory discriminations. Children living on the higher — and, therefore, more quiet — floors of the 32-story buildings had higher reading scores than children on the lower floors. The researchers hypothesized that those on the lower floors were unable to make the kind of auditory discriminations necessary for learning verbal skills. This result stood up even when social and economic class variables were partialed out. Length of residence in the building also affected the findings: Children who had lived in the building less than four years showed much less reading impairment than those who had lived there more than four years.

Rather than trying to clinically repair the psychological damage which can coincide with poor reading ability, the community mental health professional, through the environmental impact process, might achieve the primary prevention of the difficulty by making sure that residences are well insulated and that areas where children congregate (e.g., playgrounds) are kept as far as possible from sources of excess noise.

As another example, Stokols (1973) reviews the psychological research on density and crowding and speculates on its implications for community functioning:

> ... extrapolating from psychological perspectives on density and crowding, it would appear that whole communities might minimize the macro manifestations of crowding (e.g., congestion, information overload) through the implementation of social planning and urban design interventions which would reduce social interference at the societal level. Examples of such would be the improvement of communication and transportation systems so as to diminish the frictions (e.g. traffic jams) of moving through space (Hawley, 1972), and offset the occurrence of information overload (Miller, 1960; Meier, 1962). Moreover, the incorporation of

mixed primary functions within city districts (Jacobs, 1961) would reduce congestion and promote a more efficient and continuous use of space over time by attracting a variety of people (residents, consumers, recreationists) to an area during different periods of the day (cf. Perin, 1970).

There is a great deal of other research in environmental psychology which is laden with implications for community mental health (Heller & Monahan, in preparation). Certain patterns of architectural construction seem to be associated with alienation and loneliness (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950), as well as crime (Newman, 1972) and other forms of social maladaptation. A growing literature on the effects of noise pollution (e.g., Glass & Singer, 1972) and air pollution (e.g., Swan, 1972) on human behavior is also becoming available.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING

We have described a recent outgrowth of the environmental movement — the environmental impact assessment process — and suggested a possible role for the community psychologist, a role which could further the goal of positively affecting community functioning. The authors know of one area (Humboldt County, California) which has recently added a community psychologist to its environmental impact review committee and it is our purpose to stimulate others to participate in this process and monitor the effects of their participation. Should this and similar strategies appear to be legitimate and fruitful roles for the community psychologist, the implications for graduate training in the area are clear. The future community psychologist must be trained in a broad fashion. Environmental psychology must receive heavy emphasis, and cross-disciplinary training from a variety of relevant sources (e.g., urban planners, environmental health specialists, attorneys) would become a necessity rather than a luxury. Moves in this direction have already been made (e.g., the Program in Social Ecology at the University of California, Irvine (Binder, 1972; Catalano, 1974)) and are proceeding with notable success.

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