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As the Spirit of God accomplishes the work of transformation in individuals and communities, practitioners continue to explore best practices for the evaluation of community change efforts. The transformational development framework brings a unique perspective to contemporary efforts to promote community change, however, there are several common themes among a variety of theories and the research literature which seek to guide efforts to improve the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. This article will review guiding principles for the practice of community change, focusing on the evaluation of community change, through a review of contemporary theory and research. Although perspectives will represent a variety of approaches to community change, the transformational development practitioner may benefit from a broader examination of the practice of community change.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Community Change**

Efforts to promote community change and improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities have been widely explored by social scientists, health professionals, and faith-based organizations. A review of the literature reveals several overarching theories and frameworks which guide contemporary efforts related to community change. To better explore the fundamentals of community change, the social capital framework, community development framework, systems theory, healthy people healthy communities framework, and the transformational development framework have been reviewed.

A synthesis of the community change frameworks and theories referenced above provides an opportunity to outline guidelines for community change. Guidelines will serve as recommendations for communities seeking to engage in community change efforts. The overall goal of this section is to present contemporary theory in a format which is meaningful and useful to practitioners and community members who might otherwise be unfamiliar with community change theory.

### **Emphasize Community Assets and Skills**

An assets based approach is overwhelmingly emphasized within prominent theories and frameworks. The majority of frameworks draw upon existing and potential community strengths. The social capital, community development, and transformational development frameworks view community change as an outcome of a connected and resourceful community. An assets based approach is discussed in contrast to an approach in which professionals implement a prescribed plan of change for the community (Perkins, 1993, Schein, 1998).

### **Foster the Development of Strong Relationships**

Similar to an assets based approach, the development of strong relationships is heavily emphasized within contemporary community change frameworks and theories. Myers (1999) simply affirms that transformational development is relational. Contemporary views related to community change provide guidance for fostering strong relationships. Relationships should instill dignity, respect, and trust among all members of a community. Community change work should ensure a role for all community members rather than divide a community. Professionals should be a physical presence in the community, and problems should be viewed as mutual concerns (Perkins, 1993). Overall, the professional should be willing to learn from community members and benefit from relationships with community.

### **Address Multiple Levels of Intervention**

Myers (1999) clearly states that community change efforts should begin at the local level, but overall strategies must include advocacy at multiple levels to achieve social equity and a supportive governmental structure. The identification of spheres of influence and a preferred future should be directed by the community. Avolio (1997) stresses that long term sustainability of change efforts may depend upon the involvement of multiple sectors from within the community.

### **Establish Indigenous Leadership**

Perkins (1993) specifically addresses the importance of indigenous leadership in outlining Christian community development principles. Indigenous leadership is identified by Perkins as one of the essential needs of distressed communities. Indigenous leadership ensures sustainability through community, not outside, efforts. Both Perkins and Myers (1999) emphasize the role of the local church in communities as sources of encouragement and support for local leadership opportunities. Community members should be encouraged to lead and contribute to local governmental and organizational efforts as dignity and hope are instilled into community.

### **Encourage Right Thinking Related to Change**

The totality of contemporary thought related to community change supports improving thought processes. Models based upon Biblical principles specifically emphasize right thinking in the change process. Myers (1999) outlines destructive thinking by the poor and non-poor which perpetuates the effects of broken relationships in economic, political, and religious structures. Perkins (1993) and Myers suggest that biblical concepts such as dignity, hope, life, restoration, wholeness, and shalom be integral to community change in order to combat

destructive thinking. Overall, communities members are supported in recognizing their own strengths and capabilities, and patterns of domination and oppression are overcome.

### **Recognize Professional as Partner Not Expert**

Another important theme among community change frameworks and theories involves the role of the professional in community change efforts. Myers (1999) emphasizes that using a partnership approach involves an examination of patterned beliefs and behaviors which places the professional in a dominant yet distant role. Senge (1990) further cautions that often solutions implemented from outside the community can lead to chronic dependence on the outside solution. Senge explains that the professional gains power and control in this scenario and community strengths and assets are actually weakened. Well intentioned professionals efforts can therefore result in harmful long term effects for the community.

### **Leverage and Strengthen Community Resources**

Consistent with other best practices for community change, resources for community change efforts should be leveraged and strengthened from within the community. In discussing community development, Perkins (1993) asserts that money and government programs should not be the primary source of capital for community change projects. Utilizing resources from within the community should promote sustainability through community efforts. In describing the transformational process, Myers (1999) and Avolio (1997) explain that resources and strengths emerge from transformed persons and groups.

An examination of the theoretical basis for community change provides a foundation for exploring the evaluation of community change efforts. As community change efforts are implemented in distressed communities, frameworks and theories identify hope, healing, and restoration as desired outcomes. In the next section, the current research literature will be

examined to determine evidence-based recommendations for the evaluation of community change.

### **Evaluating Community Change**

This section will present the findings of a selected review of the research literature related to the evaluation of community change efforts. The literature represents a wide range of approaches to community change. Several considerations and recommendations for evaluation will be gleaned from the literature.

#### **Considerations for Planning the Evaluation of Community Change**

Woolnough (2008) outlines several useful steps in the evaluation planning process. First, Woolnough challenges planners to consider the purpose of evaluation. Possible reasons for evaluation include accountability and improvement of the program based on evaluation data. Byworth (2003) emphasizes accountability to the people community change is intended to reach as well as accountability to better understanding the process of community change.

Next, Woolnough (2008) asserts that planners should consider who will implement plans for evaluation. Woolnough references donors and professional practitioners, but several research reports discuss a participatory approach which involves donors, program administrators, professionals, community partners, and participants or community members (Aronson et al., 2006; Dart & Davies, 2003; Wilson & Stapleford, 2007). Woolnough and Foster-Fishman (2005) assert that participating in the evaluation process can have a profound impact on individuals themselves in terms of personal growth and empowerment.

Thirdly, the planning of program evaluation should address what information or categories of data are desired for data collection (Woolnough, 2008). This step most likely receives the most attention by program planners, yet Woolnough asserts that the previous

considerations are vital to understanding what information should be collected as part of the evaluation process. Woolnough explains that evaluation targets should reflect program goals and objectives.

In regards to the evaluation of transformational development, Woolnough (2008) clearly asserts that when determining what should be assessed, program planners should focus on the holistic nature of transformational development. Wilson and Stapleford (2007) describe the holistic focus of transformational development in terms of a changed worldview, involving the totality of thought processes which guide daily action. Woolnough explains that the collection of data related to material and physical outcomes is more achievable, so spiritual and non-material outcomes are often under-assessed. Although challenging to define and measure, outcomes such as transformed relationships and changed thinking are vital to understanding the stated mission of programs which seek to promote these desired outcomes.

After what should be evaluated is determined, Woolnough (2008) addresses to whom the evaluation data will be targeted. Woolnough suggests that possibilities of who will receive evaluation data range from program funders and planners to program participants, namely the poor. Woolnough and Wilson and Stapleford (2007) support the involvement of community members and participants in the entire evaluation process, including review of data and ongoing program development based on evaluation data.

Next, Woolnough (2008) discusses the timing of evaluation efforts. Formative evaluations methods are compared with summative methods. Woolnough links this decision to the determination of who evaluates in terms of the overall perspective of the project. Donors may be primarily considered with outcomes at the end of a specified timeframe whereas professionals and community members might desire information at various points throughout the process.

Lastly, Woolnough (2008) addresses the development of a model or framework to guide change efforts. The literature represents a wide variety of models and frameworks from which community change efforts are launched. Scott and Proescholdbell (2009) provide a helpful discussion related to the development of an organizing framework for a youth tobacco control program. Program goals and strategies were based on evidence-based practice, and these elements were organized into a logic model which could be utilized by youth groups seeking to make change in local communities.

### **Evidence-based Recommendations for the Evaluation of Community Change**

The literature suggests that practitioners seeks to better understand the evaluation of community change. An overall critique of literature related to the evaluation of community change provides insight into strategies and perspectives that appear to facilitate the most useful approach to the evaluation of community change. Evidence-based recommendations will be explored in this section.

#### **Use a participatory process.**

The literature overwhelmingly suggests that a participatory approach should characterize the entire community change process, including the evaluation component. A participatory approach begins with planning for evaluation (Racher & Annis, 2008; Woolnough, 2008). Community participation in evaluation should include an active role for community members, program planners, donors, and other interested stakeholders (Woolnough, 2008). Aronson et al. (2007) and Collie-Akers et al. (2009) describe research efforts which employ a formal means of collaboration through community based participatory research (CBPR) approach.

### **Utilize a creative and comprehensive approach.**

Several researchers describe creative evaluation efforts that produce qualitative data related to program outcomes (Dart & Davies, 2003; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Riley &Hawe, 2005). These qualitative methods are framed within a larger context of a comprehensive evaluation plan. For example, Dart and Davies (2003) describe a unique evaluation method entitled the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique. The method involves collecting stories of community change from program participants which are then reviewed by program directors and funders. As each level chooses the most significant change story, key values of the program, as identified by program participants, leaders, and funders, are illuminated. The process serves, therefore, to guide the program towards activities that support values of the organization.

Similarly, Foster-Fishman et al. describe the use of a participatory research method, Photovoice, to engage community residents in identification of community strengths and needs. The strategy was identified as an initial step in an on-going evaluation process. In addition to gathering information related to the community, Foster-Fishman et al. identify the strategy as a means to improve community empowerment. Overall, Woolnough (2008) encourages program planners to consider creative methods for evaluation which engage all stakeholders in the process of community change. Woolnough highlights the unique information that can be obtained from qualitative methods in understanding the process of community change from the perspective of those who participate in the process.

### **Involve research professionals.**

Aronson et al. (2006), Collie-Akers et al. (2009) and Minich et al. (2006) discuss the value of involving professionals and others trained in research procedures as part of the evaluation process. Overall, the evaluation plans outlined by Aronson et al. (2006) and Minich et



al. (2006) highlight the role of research expertise and training in strengthening the evaluation process from the planning stages through the dissemination of evaluation results. There is tension within the literature, however, in terms of balancing the role of the professional with a community driven approach.

Wilson and Stapleford (2007) and Woolnough (2008) emphasize the importance of providing a voice for the poor and marginalized in the evaluation process, however, the importance of structured evaluations plans are also recognized as essential to informing further community change efforts. Overall, professional expertise should not override community expertise and guidance. Professional expertise related to evaluation methods should be seen as a tool in implementing community driven evaluation plans.

#### **Link evaluation plan to program framework.**

Several authors highlight the importance of linking evaluation plans to a well outlined program framework (Byworth, 2003; Collie-Akers et al. 2009; Emery & Flora, 2006, Woolnough, 2008). Byworth describes a detailed framework from which indicators of transformation are defined. Byworth demonstrates how data related to transformational indicators directly link back to the program framework, highlighting program priorities and goals. Frameworks provide structure, meaning, and organization for program evaluation which can then be effectively communicated to other researchers.

#### **Base evaluation plan on theory and research.**

The literature reveals that evaluations efforts which seek to build upon theory and research have the potential to add to the greater body of knowledge related to community change. Fogel et al. (2007) and Scott and Proescholdbell (2009) directly address the importance of contributing to the body of knowledge related to community change efforts. Scott and

Proescholdbell discuss findings from a review of literature which suggests a gap related to the translation of evidence into practice.

To address this gap, Scott and Proescholdbell (2009) outline a creative strategy aimed specifically at improved communication of evidence-based research efforts to all stakeholders, particularly those in the practice setting. Programs outcomes, particularly outcomes which demonstrate successful methods, are explored in detail by evaluators and presented in a story format to distribute to stakeholders. The strategy described by Scott and Proescholdbell emphasizes the importance of adding to the body of knowledge related to community change.

Evidence gained from research may further inform contemporary theoretical understanding of community life and community change. In essence, the utilization of theory and evidence in evaluation efforts contributes to a on-going cycle of scientific inquiry. Although it may be challenging to apply scientific rigor to complex, dynamic systems such as communities, theory and research may benefit on-going efforts to improve the health and well-being of communities.

#### **Collect formative data.**

The consideration of formative data versus summative data collection relates to the timing of evaluation efforts discussed in a previous section of this paper. Overall, Fogel et al. (2007), Minich et al. (2006), and Woolnough (2008) strongly support the benefits of formative data. Woolnough explains that summative data has value, but formative strategies may greatly benefit practitioners and participants in better understanding the change process as it is occurring. Finally, Woolnough encourages practitioners that when planning evaluation efforts, formative or summative, realistic expectations should be set in terms of resources available for evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

Literature related to the evaluation of community change contributes insight and guidance into the evaluation process. Overall, transformational development practitioners should carefully consider the holistic aims of transformational ministry. The evaluation process related to holistic transformation should reflect the ideals of the Biblical basis for transformative work. Woolnough (2008) emphasizes that for the Christian, the evaluation process should include a dependence upon God for wisdom and perspective in understanding change at the individual and community level.