Ecological Strategies of Prevention in Rural Community Development

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ABSTRACT: Preventive strategies within the framework of an ecological paradigm combine elements of theory, ideology, and practice method, among others. The theory posits a relationship between socially integrated community systems and wellness, both physical and mental. The ecological focus on adaptation constrains an ideological emphasis on health and on the natural caring function of the "informal economy." Practice strategies focus on the design of supportive environments that enhance competence and that maximize the utilization of natural social processes for the achievement of preventive ends.

The ecological perspective, viewed as a Kuhnian paradigm, is a blending of theory, research method, and exemplars (T.Kuhn, 1970; Ritzer, 1975). When used as a guiding framework for professional practice in the health and human services arena, two additional elements must be added to this listing of paradigm components, namely, ideology, since professional intervention necessarily implies value preferences, and practice methods, as these reflect distinctive strategies and technologies. The emergence of the ecological perspective in the contemporary array of applied disciplines, such as public health, industrial hygiene, community psychology, social work, and others, offers a distinctive alternative to many of the traditional orientations in the organization and delivery of human services.

The appeal of the ecological perspective is that it offers alternative solutions to a wide range of critical sociopolitical and economic issues in the contemporary human services arena that are equally attractive to conservative and liberal tastes. Among its attractive features, for instance, is its emphasis on the development and support of the natural caring function of the family, the neighborhood, self-help groups, and natural helping networks—an emphasis that offers the prospect of a more efficient and cost-effective use of human resources. This emphasis on what has been called the "informal economy," which lies quite outside the calculations of our gross national product, as-
sumes added significance in a period of declining public allocations for the human services (Portes & Walton, 1981).

Similarly, its emphasis on informal and nonbureaucratic modes of social organization for the solution of common problems, as in the alternative services, on the utilization of natural social processes, such as free market mechanisms, and on natural life experiences for the remediation and prevention of human ills—all offer the prospect of an engaged and less alienated society, and a diminished dependence on excessive government and professionalism.

The focus of this presentation is on the efforts of the West Virginia University School of Social Work to integrate ecological strategies of prevention in our community development approach to the health and welfare of rural populations in the Appalachian region. Our practice model is still in an emergent state since its development is grounded in on-going field experience. However, its construction is sufficiently advanced to permit a description of its major parameters. Because of space constraints, this presentation will be limited to a discussion of the three paradigm elements, theory, ideology, and practice methods. Before doing so, I would like to offer a brief description of the Appalachian context of the field experience in which the practice model has been developed.

The Appalachian Context

The small villages in the mountain hollows of rural Appalachia offer a curious blend of historical and contemporary cross currents of social change. A typical village might consist of 50 to 100 houses, built a generation ago when coal provided a viable economic base for community life. Automation of the mines following World War II generated considerable unemployment and outmigration of the young adult population. Evidence of past vibrancy in community life is provided by now defunct community facilities, such as a company store or an elementary school building, both vacant and in a deteriorated state. Streets and roads are characteristically in a state of ill repair. Sanitary water and community sewer systems are a rarity.

These settlements are typically unincorporated, have no central decision-making machinery to deal with community concerns, and have weak ties to regionalized social services and other resources. Community surveys of need typically reveal considerable social isolation, especially among housewives and the elderly. Attitudes of resignation and apathy—born of a sense of powerlessness and of past