Communitivity and Intercommunitivity as Tools for Collective Learning to Address Ethnic Service Programming, Delivery and Evaluation

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Abstract

These research notes are based on my last ten years of experience as a community worker in a multicultural setting and a university researcher on immigrant services. The aim is 1) to introduce two new terms - communitivity and intercommunitivity – which appeal for moving beyond ethnic group juxtaposition and 2) generate new ways of thinking about how communities with different cultural grounds can construct collective meanings which support a better understanding of programming, delivery and evaluation of services in multicultural communities. The paper has implications on public policy and immigrant services programming, delivery and evaluation.

Keywords: Communitivity, Intercommunitivity, Immigrant communities, Collective meaning

1. Introduction

These research notes are based on my last ten years of experience as a community worker in a multicultural setting and researcher on immigrant services. In the context of cultural diversity celebration as revealed by the UNDP (2004) document titled *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, it becomes clear that the concepts of what I call here communitivity and intercommunitivity are better ways of understanding immigrant service programming, delivery and evaluation.

As I will show, communitivity and intercommunitivity are both processes and outcomes. As point of departure, I would like to mention that my thoughts are driven from the very vital idea that collective learning and meaning take place through collective processes leading to joint constructions of understandings and meanings, communities of learning and practices as opposed to focusing on individual learning. This is in line with Hayward, & U-Mackey (2013) discussion about the inclusiveness and power sharing outcomes of the intercultural programs for immigrants. The discussion aims 1) to introduce new concepts to better understand programming, delivery and evaluation of immigrant services in a community of communities (COC) and 2) generate new ways of thinking about how communities with different cultural backgrounds may construct collective meaning of service programming, delivering and evaluation.

I argue that approaching service programming, delivery and evaluation in communitivity and intercommunitivity perspectives can allow policymakers, services providers, and policymakers to shift their thinking from the individual to the community. It also goes along the idea of promoting ethnic social cohesion by focusing on evaluating immigrant services programming and delivery in light of collective perspective rather than individual.

The discussion has major implications if communitivity and intercommunitivity are well understood: 1) policymakers would promote the creation of an intercommunitivity programming approach which focus on providing incentives to interethnic service programming, delivery and evaluation, 2) service providers would shift programming and delivery from community/individual-based model (IBM) to an intercommunity-based model (ICBM) and 3) communities' integration would be evaluated in relation to the progress accomplished by all communities.

I will first define communitivity and intercommunitivity and elaborate in the second section on collective learning in relation to the terms communitivity and intercommunitivity. In the third section, I elaborate on the road map of communitivity and intercommunitivity construction pointing out some prerequisites for success and bumps on the roadmap. I will in the fourth section suggest some working hypothesis in relation to communitivity and intercommunitivity before concluding.

2. Defining Communitivity and Intercommunitivity

The greatest obstruction to new ways of looking at learning is very entrenched in the IBM of the learning. This model determines what is acceptable as a scientific enquiry and method in who learns and how learning takes places. Indeed, the prevailing thinking about immigrant services programming, delivery and evaluation is client-centered. This implies that the client not the community learns how to access services. This approach needs to be changed because

we live in societies with different cultural backgrounds. Different ethnic communities may have different intercultural literacy defined as the competencies, understandings, attitudes, languages proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement (Heyward, 2002). It has to be kept in mind that immigrants' cultural intelligences can be shared and a collective learning from each other may generate collective practices of immigrant services programming, delivering and service evaluation.

Looking at the definitions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, the self is who we are and think about. At this point, subjectivity is somebody's judgment, believe, emotions (Scheff, 2006). I will agree with Scheff (2006) who defines intersubjectivity as the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals. It stands on the idea of an agreement on meaning and the collective creation of collective meaning through interactions between two or more individuals. Therefore, it becomes comprehensible that there is no intersubjectivity without interrelations and the emergence of a collective meaning is qualitatively of higher-value and different than a juxtaposition of individuals' meanings (Scheff, 2006).

The assumption here is that individuals' subjectivities in complex interactions are the locus of the creation of the sameness, the likeness becoming the basis of group identity (Durkheim, 1933). There are community cultural markers that differentiate communities. However, we have to keep in mind that communities are not locked units; they are open to others when the context allows the flow. The same way individuals are open to others allowing intersubjectivity to emerge, there is an indication that through immigrant communities' interactions, not only ideas and skills are exchanged and absorbed, but most importantly, collective meaning and knowledge superior to a superposition of specific communities' knowledge takes place.

Can communities once formed be considered subjects? In addition, can we think of community consciousness or community-self-consciousness (CSC) as we refer to individual-self-consciousness (ISC)? Further, can a community exist by itself or can a community have self-consciousness if there is or are no other communities? We argue that CSC cannot exist without another existing community. In simple terms, the community-self emerges from the existence of two or more communities. In some ways, the relationships between communities are part of a being-with ethics perspective which brings up human engagement and inclusion perspective because it focuses on mutuality taking place between the I and the other (Buber, 1972; Levinas, 1991). In addition, as Buber (1972) argues the I and the other requires a mutual attitude of recognition implying at the same time that the learning process takes place through communities' interrelations based on awareness of differences.

The same way the subjective is the particular attribute of the individual, the communitive is the particular characteristic of the community. Consequently, intercommunitivity is the sharing of communitive meanings of two or more communities through constant interactions and shall generate a community of communities (COC), a new likeness of COC based on collective understanding generated by different cultural intelligences of intercultural literacies. This collectively created understanding has a value-added higher than of a single community understanding (SCU) or the community-self or the communitive.

3. Shifting the Focus From Individual to Collective Learning

Social cohesion, collective learning capacity of our communities and communities of communities will more and more depend on community capacities to collectively create collective knowledge and meanings. The caution is that, this will only be possible if communities are committed to engage in dense and meaningful communities' interactions.

In Western countries, the traditional self is based on Descartes' positivism which opposes the "I" and the "other". However, as we have significantly moved from mono-cultural societies to multicultural communities, we need to progress toward creating space for communitivity which is bigger than subjectivity. Not only cultural intelligence, meaning the capability of individual to interact effectively across different cultures is important (Earley & Ang, 2003) but the community's capability to learn from others is even decisive. We believe that not taking into account the variations in ethnic cultural intelligences may account for inefficient service programming, delivery and evaluation and ultimately lead to ethnic socioeconomic disparities.

Many governments in multicultural societies face the challenge of promoting social cohesion and avoid communities' juxtaposition. The governments' ultimate goal is immigrant communities' integration. Consequently, there is a need for a cooperative creation of collective meaning to be used in immigrant services programming, delivery and evaluation. In fact, newcomer ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds have to share the same socioeconomic, cultural and political infrastructures in their host countries. Under these circumstances, it becomes urgent to create public spaces for various communities where collective meanings can be generated during sharing experiences.

Vygotsky (1978) refers to the idea of collective subjectivity produced by joint enactment leading to a collective consciousness. This idea implies that meanings are situated in social relations within the environment people live in. If we agree that ethnic services programming, delivery and evaluation practices are social constructions, therefore there is a need to look at them in a communitivity and intercommunitivity perspective to allow the collective construction of programming, delivery and evaluation meaning to take place (Seelye, 1996).

In view of communitivity and intercommunitivity approach, ethno-cultural communities are considered open and learning systems that endlessly interact with and learn from others. It is unfortunate that ethno-cultural communities are most of time seen as impermeable entities and consequently not ready to learn from other communities. This position does not give credit to the reality of human beings. Individuals as well community learn from each other and they interact. Learning happens in interactions therefore opens the idea to the importance of community learning with the focal point being that the interactions between different people and communities involve diverse expertise and should be given support to develop (Brown, & Campione, 1994).

4. The Road Map Conducive to Communitivity and Intercommunitivity Building

No one can pretend to have the full knowledge needed to address the multiple social, political, cultural issues immigrant communities face in their new societies. This implies the requisite of a collective approach to find solutions to the complex tasks of community of communities' cohesion. We depart from the understanding that intercommunity learning happens under

some conditions and here are few of them.

First, there is a cognitive aspect to the learning process suggesting individual from different communities are engaged in sharing their views, attitudes and skills with other individual outside of their communities. This may be called the mental transfer from community to community (Aitken & Trevarthen, 1997). This process may take place through informal and formal light, dense and intensive interactions of individuals from different ethnic communities. This development is what has been called the internalization process coined by Berger and Luckmann (1966), in their book titled *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* This speaks to the very vital thought stipulating that being involved into inter-community activities increases the sense of active citizenship; develop individual and group competences and political participation (Fennes et al., 2011; Junghwan, 2014).

I would like to attract the reader's attention to the fact that I am the one who apply this internalization idea to the community as opposed to Berger, and Luckman (1966) who applied it to the individual. Keep in mind that, the same way individuals internalize what is being learned from others, the same way communities absorb and internalize external knowledge their members come with from outside of their communities. Let us consider the example of Chinese immigrants working together with African immigrants in planning and delivering services to a community of newcomers from China and Africa. As they interact with each others, they bring back to their respective communities ideas from their colleagues enriching at the same time their communities with new ideas and perspectives. This speaks volume to what Seelye (1996) termed the experiential activities for intercultural learning.

I also assume that mental transfer and internalization can be approached in a voluntarism strategy. This implies that policymakers and ethnic communities should be aware of the fact that it takes intentional actions to make things happen. The assumptions guiding the intercommunitivity approach suggest that: 1) we believe that all communities have something valuable to share with others, 2) all communities can learn from others if appropriate means that promote quality interactions are put in place and 3) resistance to collective meaning should always be situated into the social realty of communities.

The task of building intercommunitivity may encounter some troubles the same way it is difficult to build intersubjectivity (Coelho & Figueiredo, 2003; Hom, 2002). For example, some conservative policymakers may use the permanence of community cultural differences to resist against policy shift. Also is possible that powerful ethnic groups (size, money and race) may instrumentalize cultural distance as the key allegation for not trying new paths. Undeniably, the lack of trust in others' capacity to integrate new knowledge from other communities may be used by communities who have the power over others as a strategy of keeping the status quo and eventually circumvent intercommunitivity promotion.

As a final point, communitivity and intercommunitivity are about communities' partnering and partaking meaningfully in the construction of collective meaning based on inclusiveness and power sharing principles (Hayward & U-Mackey, 2013). All the way through this perspective, ethnic community members have to be aware of power hierarchy, discrimination, class and gender issues. It suffices to mention that, in many occasions community learning is obstructed by frustration encountered by ethnic communities in lower social, cultural and

political positions. For example, when some communities are approached to be part of the community of learning process, their participation may remain on a "talking, peripheral level" where their inner cultural intelligence is not taken into serious consideration. The communitivity and intercommunitivity practice must embrace a strategy of communities equally responsible in creating the needed collective knowledge essential for social cohesion. The caution is that maintaining some communities in position of knowledge receiver may lead to frustration, disappointment and even to community withdraw from collective learning.

5. Some Working Hypothesis

H1: The bigger is communities' cultural distance, the harder intercommunity will take place and the smaller is cultural distance, the easier intercommunity will take place

It has been argued among economist that cultural distance has critical impact on business practices (Hofstede, 1991). Some immigrant communities may find it fair to get involved in collective learning process in a lower or equal power position while others may want impose their cultural meaning to others. Collective learning may come with feeling of confusion because it is an unknown terrain. For example, consider that some communities may think they are losing their identity, a situation that may result in community resistance as they interact with other communities. Others may be comfortable expecting to gain and progress from new learning.

Communities with strong individualistic inclinations will probably be ready to explore what other communities offer while communities with collectivist mind may tend to be happy with internal learning and avoid contact with other communities. This is also true for societies that have different attitudes towards gender relationships. Case in point, communities that consider women less knowledgeable or think men cannot gain meaningful knowledge from women may refuse to mingle with other communities which equally value both genders' voices and strive to have equal gender representation on programming, delivery and evaluation tables.

H2: The more intense (frequency) and dense (diverse) community interactions are the quicker and stronger intercommunitivity will take place.

We argue that many multicultural societies are not yet COC. They appear to be a juxtaposition of communities not exhibiting a common understanding and collective meaning of life. They don't learn from each others, therefore offering few social innovations that could lead to collective learning and collective creation of meaning.

We know that immigrants' integration into their new society is not only linked to their perception of cultural distance but located in people's lack of meaningful interactions with others, a condition that leads to not feeling part of the community. Therefore, it is not the cultural distance to blame (Allan, 2003). The charge is on the collective failure of communities to create space for collective learning that in return generates collective understanding and social cohesion.

6. Conclusion

This discussion is about collective learning and meaning in relation to ethnic service programming, delivery and evaluation. It aims first to make the intercommunitivity central to the construction of intercommunity learning in multicultural societies. Second, it places

communities' interactions at the centre of collective creation of collective meaning. Third, this discussion suggests that policymakers and human service providers should look at the intercommunitivity as a complex process which appeals for the very simple idea that communities are not locked units. They are instead permeable and ready to learn if approached in appropriate ways.

The discussion also suggests that a deliberative strategy that focuses on community power sharing and equal opportunity is critical for collective creation of collective meaning and therefore lowering cultural distance among communities. In addition, focusing on individual immigrants' integration is inadequate in community of communities. What is needed is shifting the focus from the personal exclusions experienced by immigrants to systemic barriers that obstruct ethnic communities' contribution to collective learning and the creation of collective meaning.

Within the lenses of communitivity and intercommunitivity, services programming not only cease to be client and ethnic community-centered but makes every effort to identify the best ways for different communities to collectively construct the community of communities. This way, immigrant services evaluation will not look at the immigrants' individual successes but the ethnic communities' success as a strategy of avoiding community disparities.

The discussion leads to three implications: 1) policy makers should promote the creation of an intercommunitivity approach which focuses of collective service programming, delivery and evaluation and 2) measure immigrant communities' progress in relation to the progress accomplished by all communities.

The Jewish philosopher-theologian Buber (1970) mentioned that the "You" has mostly been overlooked in Western philosophy. He went on arguing that the essence of human being is relationship. In relation to the very ethnically diversified societies, I believe the greatest goal of communities of communities is ethnic communities' relationships higher than individual relationships, as the foundation of the emergence of the community of communities. As Buber (1970) referred to the miracle of the spirit uniting the I and You, I call for a new miracle that should unite ethnic communities with other ethnic communities through dense and intense positive relationships.

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