University-Community Partnership: Teaching Applied Social Psychology to Foster Engagement in Strategic Planning

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Abstract

In this article, we present a novel way to integrate psychological theories and research methods in an applied social psychology course as a means to foster engagement in a university-community partnership. We taught an advanced course on the application of social psychological theories and research methods to junior and senior undergraduates. Our goal was to use the course as a venue for a university-community partnership where a strategic plan was developed for the community. Lessons learned from the experience are summarized, and suggestions are provided for strengthening university-community partnerships to dispel the notion that institutions of higher learning are unresponsive to society's problems.

Introduction

As Frabutt, Forsbrey, and MacKinnon-Lewis *(2003)* note, institutions of higher learning have enormous potential to enhance the quality of life for local communities. Indeed, such a goal—to enhance the quality of life for individuals—has been the focus of many social science disciplines. Social psychology is no different from other disciplines within the social sciences in this regard. Beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the present, social psychologists have been interested in developing a social psychology that is "socially useful" *(Deutsch 1975, 1)*. However, within the realm of "socially useful" social psychology, social psychologists have devoted little attention to understanding the actions that shape and guide a community. Such activities have been defined by Bryson *(1995)* as strategic planning and have not been a focus within social psychology. Instead, strategic planning has been a domain of interest within the related disciplines of marketing and public administration.

That strategic planning has received so little attention from social psychologists is unfortunate, because communities can derive an array of benefits from it: better understanding of the environment and the community's interaction with its environment, improved decision making, and improved responsiveness

and performance *(Steiner 1979; Koteen 1989; Barry 1986; Mercer 1991; Nutt and Backoff, 1992; but see Mintzberg 1994 and Hamel 1996)*. Indeed, Cook *(1994)* may have summarized strategic planning best when he noted it is the blueprint that helps communities accomplish financial and economic stability by guiding the city in all of its decisions. Despite Cook's advice, many smaller communities have outdated strategic plans or worse—no plan at all.

This article describes how we partnered with a nearby community to update an outdated strategic plan. Specifically, we describe how community members, students in an advanced social psychology class, and faculty who taught the course played an integral role in the conceptualization, execution, and reporting of the project. We also detail how the partnership had a mutually beneficial impact on the community, students, and faculty.

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Outlining the Process

Identifying the need: A nearby community approached the Pennsylvania State University at New Kensington and asked for assistance in the development of its strategic plan. The strategic plan was intended to address and reverse some of the troubling trends the community was experiencing. Lower Burrell, Pennsylvania, is a small city with a population of about 12,500. It is located approximately twenty miles northeast of Pittsburgh and covers approximately 11.5 square miles along the Allegheny River. The community shares traits with other smaller cities located in industrialized regions in the Northeast and Midwest: an aging population, limited undeveloped areas, retail businesses relocating outside the city to more suburban locales, and loss of young professionals to more economically promising areas.

Although the community had established a committee to develop a strategic plan that could address, and hopefully reverse, the economically and socially troubling trends it was experiencing, it first wanted to assess the perceptions of the community to determine what its strengths and weaknesses were. Thus, city

leaders engaged the university in the effort because it did not have the expertise and financial resources to conduct the research. At a kickoff meeting, faculty and community leaders outlined the objectives for the project and how the project might be executed.

Project conceptualization: A two-phase project provided the framework for developing the strategic plan. In the first phase, a series of focus groups with stakeholders (four focus groups among residents and two focus groups among small business owners) were conducted to explore perceptions of the city. In the second phase, information gleaned from the focus groups was used to create a survey that quantified stakeholders' perceptions. The project conceptualization was developed through a series of meetings with community leaders and the university, which will be discussed in more detail. However, before doing so, we describe the reciprocal benefits the project afforded to the community and university.

As noted earlier, the city did not have the financial resources or expertise to conduct the research needed to develop the strategic plan. Engaging the university in this task thus had an obvious benefit to the city—the research would be conducted professionally at a reduced cost. However, the project yielded other benefits for the city as well. By working with the university, the city was able to tap into other areas of expertise possessed by the campus community. For example, faculty and students in our IST (information sciences and technologies) program were drawn into the project to assist in the development of an online survey and to help the city in improving communications with stakeholders.

For the university, the authors were teaching an applied social psychology course and were in need of a class project where students could apply their knowledge of theory and research methods to a real-world problem. The course consisted of assigned readings, lectures, and a service-learning experience—conducting the research that would be incorporated into the city's strategic plan. The assigned readings and lectures were yoked to specific class assignments. The yoking of readings and lectures to the class project helped the instructors bring to life theories and methods that students often regard as academic rather than practical. Thus, engagement with the community on the strategic plan had benefits for faculty and students. Specifically, the project encouraged student-faculty interaction, fostered cooperation among students in order to accomplish project tasks, and presented the opportunity for active rather than passive learning.

The university-community partnership: During the course of the project, faculty and students met with the mayor, the strategic planning committee, and community leaders. The mayor, strategic planning committee, and community leaders provided background and demographic information on the city, and recapped major economic events impacting quality of life and the city's current economic and social realities. These meetings set the stage for the project by identifying the informational needs of the strategic plan. It was agreed that both qualitative and quantitative research was needed: exploratory research to understand what aspects of living or operating a small business in the city were important (qualitative research) and to what degree stakeholders were satisfied with the issues they deemed important (quantitative research).

Qualitative research: Students developed a preliminary version of a recruitment script with screening questions and a structured interview protocol (i.e., a moderator's guide) for the focus groups. Once students completed a draft of the materials needed for recruitment and execution of the focus groups, community partners reviewed and offered suggestions to improve the wording and ordering of questions. In this way, students were able to create more efficient questions and lines of inquiry.

To extend the community's involvement in this phase of the qualitative research, community leaders introduced and explained the project to stakeholders and encouraged their participation. For example, religious leaders introduced the project to residents during services and spoke about the importance of their members' participation, while the president of the Rotary Club explained the project during a Rotary meeting and urged small business owners to participate. Students then began recruiting participants by two methods. An active method of "cold calling" stakeholders using the refined recruitment script was employed, along with a passive method of distributing flyers asking for interested parties to contact us. The flyers contained a description of the project and contact information (a campus voice mail box) where interested participants could leave contact information. The voice mail box was checked daily, and students would call to qualify interested individuals.[1] If qualified, the individual was invited to participate in the focus group. These techniques proved to be most successful, resulting in all the proposed residential and small business focus groups being filled.

The first author moderated focus group[2] meetings. During these meetings, students hosted the mayor and strategic planning

committee in an adjoining room, where they listened to and took notes on the group discussion. As is standard practice with qualitative data *(Krueger 1994)*, content analysis of the focus group data was conducted to produce common themes within each topic area across the focus groups. Themes were identified independently by two student coders and were included only if, at minimum, they emerged in three of the five focus groups. This was done to ensure that any idiosyncratic idea expressed in one (or two) of the focus groups would not be among the themes included in the strategic plan. After the themes were identified, representative quotes were extracted to illustrate the identified theme *(Krueger 1994)*. The following issues of importance to stakeholders (in no particular order) were identified: environmental factors, recreational opportunities, safety and security, cultural events, entertainment venues, educational system, and employment opportunities. Based on these findings, a survey was constructed to quantify level of importance and level of satisfaction for each issue among stakeholders.

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Quantitative research: Two versions of the survey were constructed—one for residents and one for small business owners. These were identical except for minor wording changes to logically reflect residing or operating a business in the city. Community partners reviewed the surveys and offered suggestions for wording and clarity.

Three different methodologies were employed to ensure a high completion rate for the residential survey. An intercept survey was conducted during weekends in April 2004 at various storefronts within the city (e.g., supermarket, department store, video store). In May 2004, a letter was sent to all households within the city describing the project and inviting the head of the household to complete a survey online or return an enclosed survey. Approximately five thousand letters (and surveys) were mailed to residents.

Two hundred twenty-seven (227) intercept interviews were completed and 1,215 mail surveys (24% response rate) were received for a total of 1,442 surveys. Fifty-one (51) mail surveys were subsequently dropped from the analysis because of incomplete information concerning residency (Do you reside within the city?) and length of residency (Have you resided within the city for more than three years?), resulting in 1,391 usable surveys. The margin of error associated with a sample of 1,391 surveys is +2.2 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

The mean satisfaction ratings are presented in table 1. Residents were most satisfied with police service ($M = 4.14$), feeling of safety and security ($M = 3.98$), and quality of the library ($M = 3.92$). They were least satisfied with the availability of well-paying jobs ($M = 2.25$), variety of entertainment venues ($M = 2.36$), ability to retain youth to the area ($M = 2.40$), and the availability of entertainment venues ($M = 2.41$).

Those who operated a small business within the city also received an introduction letter inviting them to participate in the project by completing the survey online or returning the enclosed survey. Approximately eight hundred letters (and surveys) were mailed to small businesses. Fifty-five (55) mail surveys were returned (a 7% response rate) and two online surveys were completed by small business owners, resulting in a total of 57 completed small business surveys. The margin of error associated with a sample of 57 surveys is +12.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

Small business owners were most satisfied with police service ($M = 4.25$), followed by the quality of the library ($M = 3.91$) and their feeling of safety and security ($M = 3.88$). They were least satisfied with ability to retain youth to the area ($M = 2.27$), variety of entertainment venues ($M = 2.29$), and availability of well-paying jobs ($M = 2.29$). See table 1.

Dissemination of findings: A report detailing the findings of the project was created by the university team and reviewed by community partners. Community partners provided comments and suggestions that clarified and streamlined the report. The university and community team presented the findings in a public town hall meeting. In addition, a special meeting was held for the community's state representative as well as county planning officials to review the findings. The university partners subsequently presented the results of the project at national conferences *(Harnish, Bridges, and Karelitz 2004; Harnish and Bridges 2004)*.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Satisfaction Ratings

Attribute	Residents				Small Business Owners			
	N	Mean	SE	SD	N	Mean	SE	SD
Police service	1382	4.14	.02	.834	56	4.25	.11	.837
Feeling of safety and security	1379	3.98	.02	.796	57	3.88	.11	.803
Quality of the library	1334	3.92	.02	.874	54	3.91	.07	.524
Upkeep of homes	1361	3.76	.02	.782	55	3.76	.09	.666
Cleanliness of the business district	1354	3.58	.02	.776	56	3.45	.10	.784
Upkeep of shops	1365	3.52	.02	.770	56	3.38	.10	.728
Small town charm	1365	3.51	.03	.963	56	3.32	.12	.917
Quality of parks	1341	3.46	.02	.915	54	3.50	.10	.720
Availability of parks	1348	3.45	.02	.880	54	3.52	.11	.818
Support given to small businesses by the city	1250	3.40	.03	.918	57	2.77	.16	1.18
Availability of eating/ drinking establishments	1363	3.29	.03	.971	56	3.13	.13	.992
Variety of eating and drinking establishments	1370	3.19	.03	1.02	56	2.93	.14	1.08
Aesthetics of the business district	1360	2.99	.03	.935	55	2.84	.12	.898
Availability of outdoor recreational activities	1341	2.97	.03	.933	53	2.98	.12	.888
Variety of outdoor recreational activities	1336	2.90	.03	.937	53	2.89	.13	.934
Variety of shops	1367	2.63	.03	1.07	55	2.55	.12	.919
Availability of cultural activities	1336	2.62	.03	.949	54	2.74	.14	.994
Climate for job growth	1343	2.55	.03	.920	56	2.41	.11	.826
Availability of shopping	1369	2.55	.03	1.13	56	2.38	.13	1.00
Availability of entertainment venues	1300	2.41	.03	.926	55	2.31	.12	.858
Ability to retain youth to area	1344	2.40	.02	.900	55	2.27	.11	.804
Variety of entertainment venues	1331	2.36	.02	.902	56	2.29	.11	.825
Availability of well-paying jobs	1343	2.25	.02	.820	56	2.29	.11	.825
Overall satisfaction with living in the city	1363	3.78	.02	.864	55	3.51	.11	.814

Note: Ratings were made on a 5-point scale where 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = satisfied, 5 = very satisfied

Lessons Learned

Both the university and the community have benefited from the partnership to develop the city's strategic plan. The project served as a platform for engagement with the nearby community, permitting the deepening of ties between the university and the community. Indeed, the completion of the research project did not end our partnership; it has continued as research findings are used to create a strategic plan. This, in turn, has created new opportunities for engagement. For example, it was discovered from reporting the findings to the public that the city needed new ways to communicate more effectively with its stakeholders. One method identified from discussions with community partners was the need for a city Web site. A student in our IST program has begun working with city officials to meet this need.

For the university, the project has helped Penn State New Kensington further meet its mission as a land-grant university. That is, the project enabled the university to engage its faculty and students with the community to solve social problems. As a result, Penn State New Kensington is developing a reputation as an engaged partner within the community. Indeed, the project described above has been honored with an award from the Smart Growth Partnership of Westmoreland County for embodying the principles of combining educational outreach and project advocacy "to promote the development and implementation of cooperative land-use strategies to improve the quality of life in Westmoreland County" *(Smart Growth Partnership of Westmoreland County 2004, 1)*.

Additionally, the partnership provided faculty and students with the opportunity to explore the way psychological theory—specifically, interdependence theory *(Kelley and Thibaut 1978)*—and research methods can interact to solve real-world problems. Interdependence theory suggests there are two ways, exit and voice, in which stakeholders of a community may react to their environment when dissatisfied. Residents and small business owners can try to escape from their dissatisfying environment (exit) by moving to another community, or they can take action to improve their satisfaction with the community (voice) by protesting, voting, or mobilizing.

As with any service-learning experience, students were engaged in activities that addressed a real-world problem with instruction specifically designed to promote learning *(Jacoby 1996)*. Our interest in the project was to provide students with an experience beyond that of the classroom, where they could make

connections between what they were being taught and the deeper meaning and impact that their classroom experience had on the community. We may have succeeded in meeting our goal, as the experience was not lost on students. For example, one student reported that that course "was a lot of work—more work than I thought it would be—but, it was also more rewarding and satisfying than any other course I took. I know I made a difference for the community, not just now but for its future." Another was able to use the experience gained from the project to obtain an internship with another community that is updating its strategic plan.

"The project served as a platform for engagement with the nearby community, permitting the deepening of ties between the university and the community."

For the university faculty, it afforded an opportunity to explore an area in which social psychologists have paid little attention. From this project, we were able to integrate two distinct perspectives (marketing and public administration, social psychology) on how problems are solved in communities. Such integration provides new insight for how social psychologists may approach community problems. We have proposed *(Harnish and Bridges 2004b)* that the marketing and public administration perspective views strategic planning as exclusively a top-down process—a process driven by elected officials, whereas the social psychological perspective has viewed strategic planning as solely a bottom-up process—a process that elicits exit (e.g., moving to another community) or voice (e.g., protest) behaviors from stakeholders. We propose that to truly understand how community problems are solved, both perspectives must be used: that is, it is necessary to acknowledge the interdependent relationship between elected officials and stakeholders.

While the partnership has been viewed as a success by both the university and community, the process can be improved. For example, while the community partners reviewed and provided comments on the recruiting questionnaire and survey as well as the final report, the authors questioned whether the community partners could have played more of a role in the development of these instruments, and in the analysis and report writing. From our experience, it appears another round of interaction with community

partners could have been conducted at each point to obtain additional participation. Such involvement from community partners may result in more useful data-gathering instruments as well as more insightful analysis because of the unique perspective the community partners possess *(Frabutt, Forsbrey, and MacKinnon-Lewis 2003)*.

We should also note our disappointment with the level of participation among small business owners in the qualitative and quantitative phases of the project. In hindsight, we should have relied more upon our community partners to encourage and recruit small business owners' participation in the project. Our community partners tended to be current or retired business leaders with many strong ties to the business community. As we move forward in developing the strategic plan, we are engaging community leaders to recruit small business owners who will participate in "visioning" workshops where specific aspects of the strategic plan are being developed. In these visioning workshops small business owners will be asked to "add flesh to the bones" of the strategic plan. For example, both small business owners and residents were dissatisfied with the availability of well-paying jobs in the area. This is a topic of one of the visioning workshops. Small business owners will be led through a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) exercise to identify how the city may help current small businesses (for example, letting small businesses reinvest a portion of their city taxes into their businesses) and attract new businesses (for example, given the pool of unemployed skilled workers in the city, what new businesses may be attracted to the area by that talent?).

We are optimistic that barriers to small business owner participation will be lowered as the partnership with the community strengthens through additional contact and exposure. We observed the belief among some small business owners that the project was simply an exercise for undergraduates and that the process and results of the project would not impact their business. Indeed, such

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attitudes were identified and reported by the Kellogg Commission *(2000)*—that institutions of higher learning are unresponsive to society's problems. By continuing to engage in the university-community partnership, we hope such attitudes may be dispelled.

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

1. In order to qualify for the study, participants needed to be twenty-one years of age or older and head of the household.

2. The two small business focus groups were combined due to cancellations.

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