DISPARATE PERSPECTIVES ON DEFINING COMMUNITY WELLNESS:
A study of social theory models across specific communities of interest

By

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Abstract

Increasingly, studies of the subject of wellness seem to be abounding in contemporary literature. This particular essay focuses on answering one central wellness question: Do particular social theories suggest possible explanations for processes of community wellness that suit specific communities of interest? In order to probe for a possible answer, a generalist definition for community wellness attributes was sought. Abandoning any universalized definition for wellness, the aim was to then examine three social theories: the Ecosystems perspective, Feminist theory and Social Conflict theory. Via establishing the unique value system for each theory, a wellness context was developed around these systems of values. The highlight of the investigation was to explore each social theory and these notions of community wellness across three specific communities of interest. The results were interesting as this study opens up some exciting possibilities for the field of social work and broadens the dialogue with respect to the study of community wellness principles.
Introduction

Within the last decade, there has been a great deal of emphasis on the state of personal health and wellness. This recent holistic phenomenon has sparked considerable interest in the very notion of wellness. As a practicing social worker, this search for wellness was a curious enterprise. What does wellness really mean? What makes for “well” people? This essay steers away from the personal and specifically addresses the area of community wellness within the context of three social systems theories. The central question which needs to be addressed in this project is: Do particular social theories suggest possible explanations for processes of community wellness that suit specific communities of interest? Herein is the departure point of the journey.

In an attempt to answer this profound question, this paper will firstly examine the existing definitions and attributes which constitute our understanding of community wellness. Afterwards, the direction will be to investigate the workings and ideologies of three modernist social theories: The Ecosystems perspective, the Social Conflict theory and Feminist theory models respectively. Next, we shall apply these social theories and wellness attributes across three provincial communities of interest, namely: the Métis Nation of Ontario, the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies and the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario. Lastly will be an attempt to answer the central question which was posed followed by a discussion concerning the broader academic implications with this particular course of inquiry.
Defining The Concept of Community Wellness

Searching for answers is usually fruitful when the principle question is clear. The central question for this essay deals with social theory and community process, a subject matter that is laden with mystery. To begin with, how do social theories shape our understanding of “community wellness”? The quest for an answer to this question may prove to be very elusive and pave the ground for an intriguing academic journey. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges a social researcher can undertake is attempting to define the perplexing meaning surrounding the very concept of community wellness. In researching the social science literature, it becomes clearly evident that there are in fact no common attributes or a universalized definition for what is considered to be the principles for collective wellness.

Not surprisingly, the defining principles behind community wellness can be different things to different people. Despite the lack of any common universalizing values and attributes, there does seem to emerge certain broad fundamental characteristics which enrich our understanding of this motion colloquially referred to as community wellness. These four broadly sweeping characteristics which predominantly surface within the research literature on community wellness are: (1) an emphasis on community empowerment through self determinacy (2) a specific relationship to individual wellness (3) cultural variability, and (4) wellness as an ongoing process which follows a continuum rather than being an end state.

Perhaps the best starting point would be to uncover the generic definitions for social wellness. Accordingly, a departure point for any discussion on these four characteristics would be to state the historical and broader generic definition for wellness
as articulated by the World Health Organization. In recent material published by Hattie, Myers & Sweenie (2004) which deal with wellness principles, these authors make specific reference to a World Health Organization (WHO) definition for wellness in their work. According to these authors, the WHO has as early as 1947 defined wellness as: “physical, mental and social well being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” Hattie, Myers & Sweenie (2004). This particular historical definition is important in that a reader can detect the absence of any concrete definitions for well-being, in addition to the absence of any set of collective community values which relate to wellness. In sum, the generic definition provided by the WHO fails to bridge a universalizing definition.

Community empowerment through self-determinacy (autonomy) is one interesting dimension which has been repeatedly alluded to in the literature surrounding collective wellness models. Perkins’ (1995) article on community empowerment specifically cites empowerment, self determination and active participation as fundamental characteristics that should be considered with respect to wellness. This author highlights the growing rise of self-help groups as examples of wellness through self determinacy, advocacy and collective empowerment:

Perhaps the most common form of empowerment-focused social intervention, with millions of participants in the United States alone, is the self or mutual help movement. Self help groups aim to improve psychological and physical functioning of individuals sharing some specific life experience or problem. Although many self-help groups are avowedly apolitical and eschew social action, the movement as a whole has moved over time towards models of advocacy and empowerment. (Perkins, 1995)
Self determinacy is also a community wellness principle which emphasized by Foster-Fishman & Berkowitz et al (2001) in their study on collaborative capacity in community coalitions. These authors attribute collaborative capacity as an underpinning to community self determinacy and highlight four critical areas where capacity enriches community well being (wellness): (a) within their members; (b) within their relationships; (c) within their organizational structure; and (d) within the programs they sponsor. (Fishman & Berkowitz et al, 2001).

Assessing the state of individual wellness appears to also be a characteristic towards defining an understanding of collective community wellness. In an article dealing with wellness structure and theory published by Hattie, Meyers & Sweeney (2004), individual wellness variables were modeled around five life tasks. These tasks were identifies as comprising (1) essence or spirituality (2) work and leisure (3) friendship (4) love, and lastly (5) self –direction (Hattie, Meyers & Sweeney, 2004). These authors posit that wellness as a theoretical model should highlight the state of the individual (rather than the collective state of the community) within holistic paradigm.

Accordingly, from such a vantage point, there is a suggestion that the measurement for collective wellness would be the sum total of each individual member’s capacity to function along these five life tasks.

Cultural variability is also represented within the general characteristics relating to our understanding of wellness. Cohen (1994) illustrates this emphasis on cultural variability in his research on opportunities and challenges of psychological wellness. According to Cohen, the issue of culture is a fundamentally entrenched factor when considering a definition or ideological model for wellness:
It [wellness] is not a term that defines itself automatically or easily. For one thing, built into any definition of wellness (or for that matter sickness) are overt and covert expressions of values. Because values differ across cultures as well as among subgroups (and indeed individuals) within a culture, the ideal of a uniformly acceptable definition of the construct is illusory. (Cohen, 1994)

This particular perspective by Cohen highlights the variability of culture, and ratifies the impossibility of universalizing a singular meaning or context for the concept of community wellness. Tseng & Chesir-Teran et al (2002) also endorse the importance of culture in their article which addresses causal factors for social change. They posit that power; time and cultural dimensions are important elements to defining wellness from a social change perspective: “Promotion of social change is also characterized by careful attention to values, language, and critical analysis, a reliance on systems theory, as well as a multifaceted appreciation of context that includes time, culture and power.” (Tseng & Chesir-Teran et al, 2002) Interestingly, these authors also identify the issue of wellness as an ongoing process which follows a continuum rather than resulting in an end state. In the same article, Tseng & Chesir-Teran et al (2002) state: “The promotion of social change argues for promoting processes rather than particular end-states, outcomes, or qualities that are presumed to be superior.” (Tseng & Chesir-Teran et al, 2002).

Similarly, Cohen’s (1994) previously cited article also specifically identifies the issue of focusing on processes rather than end states in conceptualizing wellness: “(a) wellness should be seen as an extreme point on a continuum, not as a category in a binary classification system; and (b) wellness is something more than/other than the absence of disease.” (Cohen, 1994)
It appears to be quite evident in exploring the broad concept of collective wellness that a universalizing ideal is not readily possible. In this discussion concerning the most fundamental and broadest characteristics surrounding a notion for wellness, the reality of examining key attributes did not materialize. As there are no universalizing principles, in order to uncover these salient defining attributes and core values for community wellness, we must first create a context. One interesting way to contextualize a wellness model is to apply existing social theory ideologies as a backdrop in which a framework of guiding wellness values can emerge. As a result, this paper shall now focus on introducing and explaining the ideology behind three specific social theories and contextualize the attributes for wellness within each theory. This section then sets the stage for the central focus of this thesis, namely a study of how these specific social theories and corresponding wellness attributes can be situated within three specific provincial community organizations.

**Exploring Social Theory Models - Contextualizing Wellness**

In terms of uncovering contemporary social theories, there are no shortages of models and ideologies from which to choose from. The theories which were selected were those most easily exercised within an eclectic social work practice and constitute disparate comparative ideologies. In my recent preparatory essay which discussed community wellness and social theories, the following social theories were previously explored in detail and will be re-visited in this section in terms of providing a theoretical overview and context for defining wellness. The social theories under examination for the purposes of this project are the *Ecosystems* perspective, the *Social Conflict Theory* and contemporary *Feminist Theory*. Let us now explore each one of these theories in
terms of their unique ideologies and respective capacity to contextualize wellness values from disparate angles.

The Ecosystems Perspective

This interesting worldview constitutes an evolution of early social systems theory thinking which is rooted in the organic study of social transactions. As explained in my preparatory 2005 essay entitled *Understanding Community Wellness: Applying Social Work Theory in Building Healthy Communities*, the Ecosystems perspective is not necessarily a theory, but is a unique framework used to interpret the relationships between individuals and their varied social environments. The key utility for this model is its capacity to generate an ecological lens by which we can learn view and better understand social processes. Of course, this perspective lacks a formal action based ideology. It is intended to be used as a holistic reference point—a transactional means of understanding one’s role and influences within immediate surroundings. The most succinct definition for this perspective is cited in Queralt’s (1996) book on social systems theory. In that book she succinctly describes the ecological perspective as: “the human ecology study of the continuing transactions between people and their environments and the accommodations that they mutually make…the most basic principle is that people and their physical-social-cultural environments form an integrated ecosystem in which each influences the others.” (Queralt, 1996, p.17). The Ecosystems model prioritizes the concept of adaptation, a notion whereby in order to ensure sustainability all ecological systems must functionally adapt to their environments in a model based on survival: “Social systems-families, groups, organizations and communities are also continually
involved in a process of adaptation with the larger contexts in which they are imbedded”.
(Queralt, 1996, p.17)

Author’s Heinonen & Spearman (2001) expand on Queralt’s definition in their book *Social Work Practice* by defining three specific realms of environments which represent the holistic dimension of social ecology. These authors describe the three distinct ecological environments which characterize this perspective. This ecological perspective in constructed around a *micro* environment system as comprising only the individual and the pair relationships he/she may experience. The also exists the *mezzo* environment system is described as the family system, small groups, workplaces, school and community organizations an individual may belong to. Thirdly, there is a *macro* system environment which includes large neighborhoods, cities, corporations, provinces and countries an individual either transacts with or inhabits. (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001) One core principle inherent within the Ecological Perspective is a term called *goodness of fit*. This term which describes environmental reciprocity champions the positive adaptive capacity between individuals and each of these three systems which comprise their environment. In terms of wellness, the ecological perspective accentuates balance and holism in terms of defining healthy community. Herein is the summarization of this theory and how it applies to transactions. The next logical question would undoubtedly be: How do these ecological values concretely shape a model for wellness?

The system of values which ultimately emerge from the ecological perspective appear to focus on balance, harmony, peace, equilibrium and holism. Social action or political mobilization ideals do not characterize this perspective. Remembering the
general characteristics for wellness, community attributes which are guided by self
determinacy; cultural variability and individual wellness are those which are most sought
out. Exploring the traditional holistic spiritual values of the American Aboriginal peoples
is perhaps the best comparative example of compatibility with cultural, community self-
determinacy and individual wellness values are clearly reflected within the ecosystems
perspective. To re-iterate my previous work on this subject, it does appear that holistic
Aboriginal values do exemplify a “goodness of fit” with ecological social theory.

For example, Weaver (2002) expands on the Aboriginal position in his paper
entitled *Perspectives on Wellness: Journeys on the Red Road* where he describes the
integration of the traditional Native ways within a wellness model and also within an
ecosystems context: “despite the adversity among the indigenous peoples of North
America, most have a concept of balance as integral to well being. Weaver (2002) alludes
to The Medicine Wheel for example as a concept which illustrates the critical importance
of organic balance within that cultural ideology. Wellness is a holistic concept and
represents different stages of life, different races of people, different aspects within
individuals, and different roles that people play within communities”. (Weaver, 2002).
From Weaver’s argument, the notion of different community roles is an allusion to the
Micro, Mezzo and Macro systems which all form part of the organic whole.

What about the capacity for self determinacy and empowerment as a wellness
value within the ecosystems model? Social researcher Perkins (1995) in his article on
community empowerment specifically targets empowerment as being the single key
attribute which defines both individual and community wellness. He goes on to describe

environmental empowerment in a manner that directly reinforces ecosystems thinking and the attribute called “goodness of fit”:

The physical environment is an important locus of both cause and effects of people’s empowerment and participation. The environmental catalyst for participation may be as subtle and seemingly trivial as the poor condition of your neighbor’s house and parents participating in the design of a new playground. Or it may be as dramatic as a toxic hazard or a large-scale or other community planning project” (Perkins, 1995)

Similar to the Aboriginal cultural belief system, Perkins also underscores the holistic importance of individual transactions within larger environments, and mentions a playground project (mezzo system) which generates participation across large-scale community environments (macro system thinking). Although his article focuses on community planning for civic empowerment, the ultimate wellness goal can be viewed as a means to strengthen and optimize the goodness of fit between citizens and their larger community environments. Ultimately, the ecological values for wellness highlight the principles of transactional balances, egalitarianism, respect, individual health and empowerment, and harmony with the environment. It is interesting to note that these peaceful values appear to be passive and restorative, and certainly not rooted in political action or proactive radical mobilization.
Social Conflict Theory

Social Conflict theory is another social system model which was previously introduced in my preparatory essay *Understanding Community Wellness: Applying Social Work Theory in Building Healthy Communities* which was the foundation for this specific project. In that essay, the explanation and supportive literature surrounding social conflict theory was as best articulated and succinct as could possibly be. Accordingly, recapping this past material is the clearest way to explore the definition, ideals and manifestations for wellness through a conflict theory lens.

Social conflict theory emerged from the belief that conflict serves a much needed utility in renegotiating power relationships within social environments. Queralt (1996) defines the concept succinctly:

Social conflict theory was developed in the 1950’s as a reaction to structural functionalism. Conflict theory reminds us that social conflict plays a central role in social life and, therefore, its sources and dynamics must be understood. This theory is particularly useful in the analysis of the relationship between dominant and non dominant classes in our society. (Queralt, 1996)

Conflict Theory is also heavily influenced by the ideas of contemporary philosopher Karl Marx. As such, this theory directly posits that the controlling dominant ruling forces in society use certain ideologies and tactics as weapons to maintain their positions of power and dominance over other groups, and thus deprive and exploit labour. (Queralt, 1996). According to the conflict perspective, the dominant group uses its power to promote its own interests at the expense of the poor and working class. Queralt (1996)
explains that conflict usually erupts because concessions by the dominant group are seldom enough to allow the oppressed group full and equitable participation in the social agenda. Consequently, this theory is firmly anchored within the dialectical principles of oppression and emancipation and social justice over social control; especially for those who have little power in society. Understanding social inequality from this theoretical lens can produce tremendous insight as a community social worker, especially when advocating for abuses to the mentally ill or for those individuals who are socially or financially marginalized through a residual social policy model.

Mullaly (1997) in his book *Structural Social Work* expands on the definition for social conflict theory with a particular relevance to the field of social work. According to Mullaly, conflict theory is simply one variant of several other theories which deal with social struggles. He identifies critical theory as the dominating offspring of conflict theory and believes it to be the founding ideology behind what is called *structural social work*:

Structural social work is part of a school of social theory known as critical theory. It provides criticisms and alternatives to traditional mainstream social theory, philosophy and science. It is motivated by an interest in the emancipation of those who are oppressed, is informed by a critique of domination, and is driven by a goal of liberation. (Mullaly, 1997, p.108).

In terms of community processes, Mullaly believes that freely mobilized community organizations must challenge the economic controls brought on by government and policy. Mullaly argues that modernism is an ideology of control and
believes in giving a voice to those oppressed groups and those who have been purposefully excluded from the modernist/capitalistic Eurocentric controlling agenda aptly named “The Grand Narrative”.

Interestingly, social conflict theory in its most fundamental state polarizes social forces along the lines of either dominant or oppressed groups. From a wellness perspective, the political ideology and core values seem rooted in those principles surrounding individual and community activism, political resistance, affirmative action and (in most instances) non-violent forms of civil protest. Based on the political framework for this theory, it would be a reasonable assumption to suggest that any shared set of values for community wellness experienced from a social conflict theory lens must be fundamentally rooted in a common belief for emancipation from oppression, political activism and most of all social justice.

In his work *Value-Based Praxis in Community Psychology: Moving Toward Social Justice and Social Action*, Prilleltensky (2001) points out some of the inherent challenges of community wellness from within a social conflict values system:

Although values need to promote personal, collective, and relational wellness at the same time, it is argued that community therapists pay more attention to personal and relational wellness than to collective wellness. In order to address this imbalance it is important to promote the value of social justice. (Prilleltensky, 2001)

His main argument is that in defining community structures, psychologists express an overemphasis on elitist individual values rather than on promoting community
values. As a result, the ruling dominant society has marginalized our capacity for community wellness along with the groups of exploited citizenry. He defines wellness from a social justice paradigm, within the combinations of organismic, familial, community, and societal elements:

The elimination of oppression, discrimination, and violence would lead to healthier citizens and healthier communities (Hill Collins, 1998; Montero, 1994; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). To achieve that objective, we need to promote social justice and social action, and not just individual empowerment and compassion for disadvantaged populations. Similarly, we need social action and social justice to promote wellness in society. Wellness may be defined as a favourable state of affairs, for individuals and communities, brought about by the presence of psychological and material resources. Wellness is not the same as the absence of disease. Rather it is defined by the presence of positive marker characteristics that come about as a result of felicitous combinations of organismic, familial, community, and societal elements. (Prilleltensky, 2001)

Expanding on the use of extreme collective social action, Plog’s (2003) research on social conflict and social structure is far more ominous. His work echoes a belief against the pacifist concept of wellness and proposed a more radical belief in creating social conflict as a beneficial force in society. Wellness (from a community perspective) according to Plog (2003) is rooted in cultural change, and war is the singular causal factor to cultural change: “From this (conflict) perspective, warfare is fundamentally a social
action and understanding the co-evolution of war and society becomes critical”. (Plog, 2003). It is difficult to comprehend from an ecological value system that wellness can be war; however in reading Plog’s work, he creates a rational and convincing argument that civil and international war, in its cruelest face, can be framed as a healthy representation of core social conflict values which foster collective community wellness and ongoing cultural renewal.

Conversely, South African researchers Odenall & Spies (1997) define the social conflict elements of community wellness via their cultural and social interpretation of “peace”. These researchers eloquently point out that pursuing peace can create social upheaval, as peace is a merely a socially constructed idea: “Black and Whites in South Africa generally had different perceptions on what peace meant. To Whites, peace meant the absence of violence and protest actions, and cooperation in the chambers of power find agreeable solutions to problems. The only visible violence in society would be that of the police, the courts, and the prison systems enforcing this type of peace.” (Odenall & Spies, 1997). Interestingly, these authors highlight how language and cultural variability affect primary definitions for wellness. In this example, the pursuit of non violent peace can create a platform for passive social non-compliance and resistance to the dominant force.

Notwithstanding these forces of oppression, community wellness values which are based in social conflict ideology do remain clearly articulated as cornerstones within the Black South African community:
To those in the liberation struggle, peace meant the establishment of a society based on justice. Their perception of peace was determined by their experience of structural violence. For Black people, peace therefore meant dismantling the apartheid system, creating new power structures, and equalizing economic imbalances”. (Odenall & Spies, 1997).

As we can see from this particular literature, principles for community wellness can as easily evolve from within a conflict ideology just as easily as it can be expressed from within an ecological perspective. Let us now define and explore feminist theory in search of possible collective wellness applications and key attributes.

**Feminist Theory**

Feminist Theory is a very effective activist intervention model in the field of social work. This particular theory was also discussed and examined in terms of wellness attributes in my preparatory essay for this project. This section highlights the core concepts of feminist theory and wellness applications which were uncovered in my 2005 preparatory essay for this project. Feminist Theory is a very complex area of academic study, one which continues to evolve in the face of our transforming global societies. Feminism is both a social theory and a political movement primarily informed and motivated by the worldviews of women’s experiences. While generally providing a critique of social relations, many proponents of feminism also focus on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues. According to the
Labour Law Encyclopedia feminist theory concerns itself with power and gender issues in society:

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Feminist political activism campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment, discrimination and sexual violence. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression and patriarchy.

(http://www.encyclopedia.labourlawtalk.com/)

The basis of feminist ideology is that rights, privilege, status and obligations should not be determined by gender. Social work theorists such as Heinonen & Spearman (2001) define feminist social work practice in terms of core principles and an overarching common value system: “feminist social work practice, based on a core of principles, is concerned with eliminating domination, subordination, exploitation, and oppression of women.” (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001, p. 296). The core values which they mention are

(a) validation (for women’s experience) (b) consciousness raising (c) transformative action and (d) affirmation.

Germain & Bloom’s (1999) feminist theory definition expands on these values in even more detail to include: empowerment, unity, the need for conflict, openness to different ways of thinking, and the interrelatedness of all things. (Germain & Bloom, 1999, p.404). Curiously, it is important to highlight that these feminist values do incorporate elements of social conflict theory (the need for conflict) as well as an
ecosystems perspective (interrelatedness of all things). In terms of a community wellness value system, feminist theory does appear to incorporate, at least from Germain & Bloom’s (1999) perspective certain themes from both the ecosystems and conflict theory ideologies which does suggest an interesting theory composite.

Drawing on different values, authors Mulvey, Terenzio & Hill et al (2000) in their article on feminist communities believe that a wellness model must come from inside the construction of women’s stories. They point out the need for a more empowering “wellness narrative” that becomes a shaping force in propelling feminist communities towards further equality and social liberation.

They further believe that existing stories about women have been authored by men, and society has therefore manufactured an androcentric definition about women’s issues (Mulvey, Terenzio & Hill et al, 2000). A feminist community wellness model therefore begins with a collective narrative which redefines the roles of women in society through more liberating metaphors and with a new language of empowerment based on women’s experiences. Wellness from this vantage point becomes the social construction of “new maps of meaning” for feminist communities. The wellness ideal for some feminist communities may therefore be to reach a stage of total emancipation from the tyranny of patriarchy and actualize a state of self-defined social legitimization.

Perkins & Zimmerman (1995) approach feminist community development through a specific focus on building empowerment, participation and inclusion: “Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to social policy and social change”. (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).
Not surprisingly, empowerment and wellness appear to be different faces of the same concept. These researchers suggest that participation with others and obtaining access to resource bases are the basic component of a wellness/empowerment construct. There is also mention of blending feminist theory with “empowerment theory” for the pursuit of creating collective goal directed outcomes: “Community-level empowerment outcomes might include evidence of pluralism and existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resource”. (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995)

Similarly, Foster-Fisherman & Berkowitz et al (2001) also champion the coalition model in their idea for successful feminist community building. They refer to the term “collaborative capacity” as the building block for community strength: “Collaborative capacity refers to the conditions for coalitions to promote collaboration and build sustainable community change”. (Foster-Fisherman & Berkowitz et al, 2001). They view a coalition’s membership as its primary assets, and promote an ethic of help, support, collaboration and emotional support. The end result is to build wellness through what is called *Relational Capacity*. The authors suggest that successful communities have the ability to create internal relational capacity (membership relationships of collaboration) in addition to external relational capacity (interdependence with other community sectors and stakeholders).

In looking at a community wellness design, these feminist authors seem to champion the building of values centered on meaningful relationships (rather than individual preoccupations) as the common attribute in building strong communities. Within these examples of feminist theory, the promotion of coalitions echoes a belief in the power of collectivism, community and in voluntarily organized associations. The
belief in manufacturing empowering narratives echoes a dire need to change the
dominant Grand Narrative and socially legitimize the shared experiences expressed with
all minority groups.

By delving into these social theories, we have been able to explore disparate
ideologies and value systems which have resulted in divergent attributes for defining a
concept called community wellness. Now that we have examined the social theories and
have established that these social theories seemingly generate a social context for
defining wellness, it is time to analyse these social theories and wellness attributes across
three specific communities. For the purposes of this project, the community study shall
involve three provincial community organizations: The Métis Nation of Ontario, The
Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, and the Schizophrenia Society of
Ontario.

An Analysis of Social Theory Across Three Specific Communities of Interest

An intellectual analysis of social theory and wellness attributes may have merit in
its capacity for promoting general thought and discussion on issues of community
process. A far more elaborate approach however is to analyse social theory and wellness
values in their relatedness within specific community organizations. This section of the
paper will now focus on introducing three specific community organizations and define
their objectives, values, social ideologies in addition to their service mandates. Next, the
focus will be on situating and discussing these specific communities and relevant
ideologies from within the Ecosystems, Social Conflict and Feminist Theory worldviews.
Finally, an analysis of wellness values will be discussed as they apply to each specific community of interest.

**Métis Nation of Ontario**

The Métis people are generally considered to constitute Aboriginal people who have historical birth roots within the Canadian Francophone population. Within the last few decades, the term “Métis” has come to signify any Aboriginal person who is constituted to be of “mixed blood” and/or mixed cultures including the French, Scottish, Sioux, Cree Ojibway and Assiniboine peoples. Historically speaking, the Métis people have not been entitled to the full spectrum of federal rights and privileges which were accorded to those of pure blood Aboriginal pedigree. Understandably, the Métis people have been lobbying and organizing their people in an attempt to legitimize their status as Aboriginal people through political action networks and community organizations such as the Metis Nation of Ontario (MNO).

According to the MNO website, The Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) is an organization which is part of the Métis Nation “a distinct Nation among the Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and as such our Aboriginal and treaty rights are recognized and affirmed under Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982.” (MNO website, 2004)

“brings Métis people together to celebrate and share their rich culture and heritage and to forward the aspirations of the Métis people in Ontario as a collective.” (http://www.metisnation.org/insideMNO/home.html) Initially formed in 1994, after a founding delegates meeting that included Métis people from across the Province of Ontario the MNO focuses on nation building and bringing Métis people together to claim...
an inheritance within the province of Ontario. Funded in part by a provincial grant through the Trillium Foundation, the MNO pursues its vision in building a stronger Métis Nation. The ideal behind nation building seems to promote the value of collective community empowerment rather than offering exclusive support to individuals:

The founding delegates established the fundamental principles of a representative organization intended to reflect the values and aspirations of a proud people.

Determined to avoid the failure and narrow vision evident in so many organizations driven primarily by self-interest and short-term goals, the delegates made a conscious decision against a 'corporate' focus. Instead, they sought to bind their people together in the spirit of nation-building.

(http://www.metisnation.org/insideMNO/home.html)

What are the guiding values behind the MNO? Their website does articulate a central purpose for the MNO which is to support and further the development of self-government institutions for the Métis Nation in Ontario and to represent and advocate for the distinct interests for the Métis people of Ontario. There definitely exists a political values system within the MNO as they aspire towards self-government: “The Métis Nation of Ontario supports the development of institutions of self-government for the Métis and advocates their distinct interests.”

(http://www.metisnation.org/insideMNO/home.html)

Another dimension to the MNO is their focus on holism. The MNO continues to promote ecological principles of living in harmony with the environment. They continue to lobby for harvesting rights with fishing and hunting with a belief in conservation. The MNO provides direct programs and services such as work training,
housing subsidy, education funds and economic development programs designed “to allow Métis communities across Ontario to flourish and to bring change to their socio-economic circumstances including improving their job and income status, finding funds for education, improving access to health care and creating self-sustainability.”

(http://www.metisnation.org/insideMNO/home.html) In sum, the MNO can be said to pursue a set of core values which are integrated within their *Statement of Prime Purpose* which identifies genealogical research, addictions recovery, educational advancement, community development, healthcare, community networking, ecological self sufficiency and political self-government and international legitimacy as a legally defined nation state. (http://www.metisnation.org/insideMNO/home.html)

Having now identified the core beliefs and values behind the MNO, the central question is: Which social theory and related attributes of wellness would best reflect this specific community’s formative ideology?

In perusing this specific organization’s values and ideologies, it is apparent that two central defining aspects emerge: the building of a nation (self-government) and community self-determinacy. In taking a snapshot approach in situating the MNO within a social theory model, it would appear that indeed the ecological perspective does manifest the best “goodness of fit” given the overlapping values which are evident. Based on the political aspects and given this community’s unique mission statement and related social cause, we must now make an attempt (if possible) to situate the MNO within an applicable social theory model and then try to isolate any collective wellness attributes based on the organizational value system. The ecological values as previously discussed center around principles of transactional balances, egalitarianism, respect, individual
health and empowerment, and harmony with the environment. The mission statement and community long-term objectives of the MNO involve culturally sensitive member education, empowerment, environmental balance, capacity building and community economic development. These holistic values are direct reflections of ecological principles and hence it would be a reasonable argument to state that the current state of the MNO can be most easily understood from within an ecosystems perspective.

Feminist theory ideals do not as readily apply to the operational values within the MNO. Within a feminist model, a community would be focused on redressing patriarchal power differentials and focus on consciousness raising in an attempt to effect change and inclusion on new power structures society. The gender issue or challenges to a power differential does not really surface within the MNO.

Social conflict theory also seems to share only a limited connection to the “snapshot” comparison with the MNO. What is interesting is that the MNO is motivated towards political divestment and ratification of a new nation built on different principles than those of the oppressing country. The radical social conflict values are not articulated with the MNO values in its current state however we should also note that in Plog’s (2003) work, the value of “social emancipation through cultural renewal” are approaches in principle that the MNO endorse- only without the social conflict component. Notwithstanding these differences, one could argue that some key fundamental social conflict values may indeed fester in the political underbelly of the MNO. The best theoretical positioning nevertheless remains that of the ecological perspective. States of community wellness therefore within the MNO would be best defined and measured through the positive attainment and pursuit of
holistic, egalitarian, individual health and through states of empowerment and self-direction.

Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies

Another unique community of interest in the Province of Ontario is the *Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies* under the acronym (OACAS). This particular organization. The OACAS is a membership organization that represents 53 Children’s Aid Societies in Ontario. This organization historically dates back to 1912. The services offered by the OACAS include the promotion of child welfare issues, member services, government liaison and policy development, research and special projects, quality assurance in child welfare practice and training for all protection workers throughout the province. (http://www.oacas.org/)

Promoting child welfare service issues is a critical role for OACAS. According to their website, the OACAS is in a unique position in Canada because child welfare services in Ontario are based in the community and governed by voluntary boards of directors. State-run child welfare delivery systems cannot advocate for best practices and other critical issues because the political and service arms are one and the same. (http://www.oacas.org/). The OACAS represents five non profit Children’s Aid Societies in the province of Ontario and they passionately advocate for children and families, community services and best practices in service delivery. This organization makes advocacy, protection of children’s rights and monitoring the practices of the Children’s Aid Societies to ensure that non abusive, safe and respectful services are followed. As
such the OACAS is a lobby group and rights advocate organization committed to protecting the rights of families and neglected children.

The Association is funded through membership fees, government grants and other revenue producing activities. OACAS provides system support to its member societies to assist and enhance their role in the community. Some of the services offered to member societies are accreditation, consultation services, French language services support, information and database services, the Ontario Child Protection Training Program, training and support to foster parents as well as our Youth in Care Network Support Program. (http://www.oacas.org/) The core values which are articulated in the mission statement are protection, advocacy, leadership, and promotion of wellness:

OACAS, in support of its members, is the voice of child welfare in Ontario, dedicated to providing leadership for the achievement of excellence in the protection of children and in the promotion of their well-being within their families and communities. (http://www.oacas.org/).

Membership to the OACAS is reserved for those who are currently employed with a local provincial Children’s Aid Society in Canada. The agency also acts as a “watch dog” for these CAS agencies and proactively represents complaints made by the public against any agency’s practices or standards of care. Accordingly, the OACAS performs the role of a monitoring agency and regulatory body for the rights of children. This is a synopsis of the agencies ideology, values and mission statement for the purposes of this examination. The interesting analysis at this time now involves discussing and
situating the OACAS’ central value system within our social theory models and consequently uncover any remarkable attributes of wellness.

Which social theory model best fits the values within the OACAS? In examining the three theories, we can first and foremost disqualify the social conflict theory as a compatible ideology. The values system espoused within a social conflict model are somewhat contrary to the “anti-abuse” and anti conflict power sensitivities which are described on their website. The OACAS are actually a non-partisan, apolitical community whereas the social conflict theory is steeped in radical social action to protect cultural and social causes. Perhaps the best “snapshot” fit for the OACAS, given its specific advocacy for the marginalized and less powerful (such as children), would be with the values relating to Feminist theory ideology. Remembering Perkins & Zimmerman’s (1995), these authors argued that feminist community development is achieved through a specific focus on building empowerment, participation and inclusion: “Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to social policy and social change”. (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). The values behind the OACAS marries these values superbly, lobbying for empowerment, social pro-action against power differentials (the “watch-dog” function) and helping mothers and children via family empowerment strategies and protecting their rights against abuse by intrusive child protection practices. In this example, gender issues concerning women’s mothering roles are very relevant within the values of power. The ecological perspective can also be expressed albeit minimally, since any holistic balance values are far less emphasized than those surrounding institutional power differentials and rights to social inclusion.
In terms of wellness values, feminist theory would emphasize pro-action, a focus on consciousness raising, equalizing power differentials and challenging patriarchal social systems (such as hierarchies) as a means of legitimizing social equality for its members. The OACAS philosophically supports the very same values in its mission statement and therefore its current direction is best reflected through a feminist theory lens. The degree of community wellness from that paradigm can be reflected through the degree of membership success in appropriating equal rights and power for families and the protection of children. Let us now explore how these specific social theories apply themselves across our last community of interest.

**Schizophrenia Society of Ontario**

There is perhaps no greater debilitating neurological disease than that of schizophrenia. Those afflicted with this disorder oftentimes hear voices and suffer terrible hallucinations. Fortunately, provincial support communities do exist which address this illness. In Ontario, the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) is one such organization which aims to provide support and information for those affected by schizophrenia. The collective vision which is articulated on the SSO website focuses on a world without schizophrenia along the following road: (1) society must recognize schizophrenia as a serious brain disease (2) excellence in service and treatment must become the norm (3) stigma must be eliminated, and lastly (4) a cure must be found. (http://schizophrenia.on.ca/). The SSO also has a mission that articulates improving the quality of life for families affected by schizophrenia, specifically between people with schizophrenia, their relatives, friends, and other individuals in a supportive capacity.
Membership to the SSO is open to anyone who is committed and willing to become an “ambassador” for schizophrenia awareness through education in addition to advocating for families and schizophrenia awareness in the community. Although there is some government subsidy for the SSO, the bulk of the operating expenses is derived from charitable grants, corporate philanthropy and personal donations. The SSO follows a highly specific mandate which clearly represents their guiding values and beliefs as a community of interest. This mandate also encapsulates the fundamental “raison d’etre” and philosophy behind the inception of the organization, and henceforth states a mission: (a) to support, educate, engage, and empower families (b) to promote community awareness (c) to advocate on behalf of families affected by schizophrenia (d) to work cooperatively with organizations for allied disorders (e) to support and advocate for relevant research, and (f) to promote early intervention of schizophrenia. To summarize this mandate, the SSO is committed to empowerment, awareness promotion, advocacy, education, support, and community agency networking.

The values espoused with the SSO reflect social inclusion, education, research, support and community awareness. Similar to the OACAS, we can again remove social conflict theory as being a compatible and fitting ideology with this community organization. In fact, the SSO’s main principle is social inclusion for a marginalized group with social stigmas. The notion of political conflict and cultural renewal simply are not relevant values. In studying the SSO’s mandate, one does not get the sense that values of holistic balance and an emphasis on balancing micro, mezzo and macro system transactions are of central importance. The emphasis on raising awareness for schizophrenia,
challenging the stereotypes surrounding mental illness, and empowerment for those afflicted with this disease through equal rights and social membership seem to be the salient beliefs. Given the three social theory choices under examination, the core values inherent in feminist theory can be deemed to best reflect the SSO’s values, ideals and mandate. Since feminist principles are more rooted in power differentials than they concern gender, this SSO argument towards feminist theory ideals are even more fitting. Foster-Fisherman & Berkowitz et al (2001) reinforce this feminist thinking when they argued:

“feminism is the building of meaningful relationships (rather than individual preoccupations) as the common attribute in building strong communities. Within these examples of feminist theory, the promotion of coalitions echoes a belief in the power of collectivism, community and in voluntarily organized associations.

(Foster-Fisherman & Berkowitz et al, 2001)

In terms of feminist community wellness attributes, community values based on consciousness raising, community coalitions, awareness of power differentials and emphasis on organized associations would be at the heart of the matter. Accordingly, the SSO from a feminist theory lens would measure its wellness through its collective capacity to succeed in attaining social inclusion, national awareness about schizophrenia, curing schizophrenia, and effectively networking with other similar coalitions for mutual empowerment. Social equality for people with schizophrenia is no different than social equality for women and minority groups.
Discussion

The application of social theories across specific communities of interest has created a highly interesting framework for understanding the perspective of wellness. This particular study focused on a real-time “snapshot” perspective of analyzing social theories within community value systems. The OACAS and SSO community examples highlighted how some social theories and corresponding value systems simply do not render themselves as being viable or fitting ideologies without much need for analysis. Both the SSO and OACAS communities also underscored how feminist theory does not necessarily need to directly address gender issues within a larger analysis of social power and social inclusion. Without question, attempting to ‘fit’ theories against communities of interest does entail a subjective component as there does not exist a quantifiable screening tool, selection criterion or set of standardized conditions in order to chose the most appropriate theory. Notwithstanding this limitation, the most interesting area of analysis is how the concept and attributes for wellness can originate and be pursued from disparate perspectives and values depending on which social theory one selects.

The most interesting dimension of this study emerged in the study of the MNO and the applicable social theories which were considered. The MNO example raises some interesting questions about the possibility of more than one theory having meaningful relevance. For example, could the MNO shift from ascribing to the ecological perspective towards embracing social conflict values over time? This raises some interesting possibilities concerning the evolution of communities and their capacity to manufacture new value systems as they transform. More specifically, could the MNO after failing to attain a nation state due to federal political oppression, ultimately shift over time from
pursuing ecological values to embracing political and conflict based values of radical cultural emancipation? Since all systems are constantly in a state of change, evolving community value systems may be possible and this heralds the idea of conducting a longitudinal study on communities of interest. The MNO example highlights the speculative change in community process that time, external pressures and shifting values can create within the lifespan of a community organization. Community values may drastically shift depending on which direction that community has evolved or mobilized. With any sudden shift in community values is a resulting change in alignment towards different social theories which ultimately serve to reflect those new values. The end result will be a shift or change in defining new attributes for community wellness. Assuredly, this specific study surrounding communities, social theory and wellness attributes has created some fascinating opportunities in which to study the marriage of theory to community process. The SSO, The OACAS and the MNO are merely samples and departure points. Beyond the Ecological Perspective, Social Conflict theory and Feminist theory are a myriad of possibilities waiting to be explored within the larger study of community wellness principles.

**Conclusion**

This major essay sought to fundamentally explain one central question: “Do particular social theories suggest possible explanations for processes of community wellness that suit specific communities of interest? Based on this inquiry, the answer to such a question is a resounding “yes” - social theories do indeed seem to suggest possible explanations for processes of community wellness that suit specific communities
of interest. As this essay revealed, there exist a set of particular values and ideals which serve to ground social theories. It is only through pursuing those values that a context for wellness can be manufactured. When values within a community of interest are in alignment with similar social theory values, community wellness attributes do emerge as a reflection of both sets of values.

What are we to learn from this discourse? Perhaps the greatest lesson is discovering how complex these community processes can be. Through defining and explaining three social theories, different philosophies and beliefs about how social systems transact were thoroughly examined. In applying these theories across three communities of interest, we uncovered interesting faces to community wellness. Through integrating social theories against specific communities of interest, we are now charting new territory. In the final analysis, let this paper serve as a basic guide for the next fearless explorer. One who must be unafraid to set sail in the unmapped waters where the seas of social theory and tides of community wellness either naturally coalesce or turbulently collide.
References


