

Introduction

Human Ecology and Community

Robert J. Gregory

What if you walked into a new and different community and began listening and learning about the lives of the local people? Where might you begin? To whom would you talk? How many of the various peoples and parts of this community might connect and intersect? Who holds the power in a community? When would a visitor feel they understood the residents and their patterns of life unique to this particular community?

Given ecological theory, are the people of a community independent, dependent upon each other, or truly interdependent? Do they occupy common or unique niches? Is there diversity or do common characteristics rule? What exactly are the interrelationships between individuals, and between the various sub-communities? Does the environment and context shape behaviour?

Indeed, many questions emerge when a wanderer, sojourner, or visitor enters some new and enchanting, or even a dismal, place. But even more questions arise when a social scientist, a human ecologist, or a community psychologist venture forth to examine a community of people, whether to test theories, develop conceptual frameworks, or simply get a deeper feel for a group of people located in one place, and at one time.

For me, after living in Palmerston North for nearly 20 years, I know my community reasonably well. Big enough so that I can still get lost and so that I can visit an event or two and remain anonymous, Palmerston North is also small enough so that I can always find my way home and nearly always locate someone I have met previously wherever and whenever I go to town. But, I decided to ask my students to go forth and explore, to look for and find an interesting part of this ever fascinating community, to get acquainted, and most of all, to try to understand – what is life really like for the people of the many different locales of this community? Furthermore, I asked them, using ecological concepts, to figure out how the people in various places fit together and relate through the

institutions and organizations available.

Students can be creative, imaginative, and astute as they gain new skills and abilities in exploration of a community, and as they gain new conceptual frameworks and knowledge of the patterns underlying the surface structures. Their understandings based on their education and personal research will enable them to make sense of other communities they may visit, inhabit, or create. Their efforts are also of interest to those engaged in the serious study of human ecology – to note the methods, the styles, the findings and results that turn up in the process, and to “see” what life is like in a human community. By concentrating on just one community, the student-researchers can begin to fit together the myriad of diverse groupings, and provide a rich feast for readers seeking enlightenment – well, what is a community, what is life like in that community, and who are these guys anyway?

So it is with this collection of articles. Each author has gone forth to a part or sector of the City of Palmerston North, New Zealand, armed with ideas and investigative persistence, and returned with a story to tell. Placed end to end, the accumulated stories tell a larger picture of what life is really like in Palmerston North, and about the kinds of understandings that result from serious examination of this particular place. Not all parts of the community were covered, there are, I am confident, literally hundreds of groupings that could have been studied. The sample, however, is sufficient to demonstrate that even for those long resident, no one person knows all, but remarkably, at the same time, everyone does know at least part of the same big picture. Virtually all are aware of some major aspects and features of this community that are held in common. Virtually every person has some unique knowledge, experience, and connections within this larger framework.

Throughout, the most popular theoretical or conceptual vision held by these investigators is that of human ecology, exemplified by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Kelly (1990) but

occasionally mixed with general systems theory (Buckley, 1967, 1968) or ideas from varied approaches such as empowerment (Rappaport, 1987; Riger, 1993). Dozens of books, journal articles and reports back up hours and days of observations, participation, and investigation. Analysis and writing and rewriting added countless days of putting together a complex, and sometimes chaotic, puzzle.

Through the processes of exploring Palmerston North, my students have become colleagues, and our community has been laid bare for all to see. My hope is that this community study and the human ecological perspective adopted, will be regarded by readers of this special issue of the *Journal of Human Ecology* as an adventure, a special tour using a roadmap that will enable and stimulate them to view, understand, and create other visions of community, around the world.

The story begins with an exploratory visit to Palmerston North by Peter Arends, who came as a visitor to New Zealand from Europe. His explorations of our community yielded a historical and cultural perspective. He noted the unique significance and importance of the Rangitane and the role of Maori in the establishment, growth, and contemporary strength of this city. Insights from cross-cultural visitors are particularly acute, for we have become accustomed to life here, whereas a person from elsewhere is likely to "really see" what has become obvious and so ignored, to us. So it was with Arends' observations and story. As well, he also traced some of the modern historical development of Palmerston North, finding many remarkable and interesting facts about those of us who choose to live here.

Anderson begins with her article about a primary school she calls Apple School. As adults, we often look back to our primary school as a major point of gaining "awareness" as to our own personalities and place in society. Genetics, family socialisation, economic status and neighbourhood provide us with a background, but it is in the universal experiences of early schooling that force us to begin learning the common culture, making the inevitable comparisons with others, and gaining resulting self-awareness, as we grow up. So it is with Class One, a location in which some children become popular, or isolated, some gain skills as leaders, or followers, or for a few, as trouble-makers. This

preparation for subsequent roles in the larger community addresses the human development issues prevalent today in our communities. At what early age do individuals begin their track toward a happy and fruitful life, or towards a problem filled and difficult life? Does bullying begin at an early age, and then evolve into the prevalent socio-economic status system so evident in all human communities? Are there parallels evident between status hierarchies in primary school with the status hierarchies in communities, in corporations and Parliament, and in nearly all groups throughout the country? Certainly the primary school is central to the beginnings of our lives and forms the basis upon which we build the subsequent directions we take (or are taken!).

After primary school, high school is a near universal experience for all members of the human community, at least in developed nations and too, in much of the developing world. Social class and future occupational roles are confirmed at this point in life. In a recent study in the United States, Ortner (2002) uses a fourfold classification based on social and economic class, that is, high or low, and personality, either tame or wild. Those who excel in sporting careers, or who become cheerleaders are often of high class status, and possess relatively wild personalities. Those less wild, but still high class, are frequently highly popular young people, and are likely to become class officers. For those with less capital in their background, they may become ordinary citizens although if they are intelligent, they might be the "nerds" or "egg-heads." If wild, they have a greater chance of becoming "hoods" or "sluts" or individuals to whom other stigmatizing labels may attach.

New Zealand is of course, a different culture, and different terms apply. Yet the notion of wild and tame personalities, and higher and lower class, can still fit the potential roles available to high school students. Pugmire examines a high school situation, focusing especially on those who make and enjoy music within the school. In fact, the high school and its music suite have similar issues, such as inclusion and exclusion, leadership and followership, high and lower class, and divergent personality types. High schools provide a common experience for us all, and our experiences at that point in life stamp, confirm, and set parameters for our subsequent identities, roles, directions, skills, and values.

Music at the high school level is fascinating as a focus of activities that provide numerous links to the larger community and the artistic and creative side of life, and as well, an entry point into our own personal futures as citizens and members of the community.

Brophy follows this developmental pattern to note that an agency that helps young people find a link to employment and business constitutes both a community of its own and a valued service to both students and employers. This business provides more than just a business – perhaps a logical next step for those young people who complete their secondary schooling and while studying further, a source of entrance into the larger world. Young people do have opportunities galore to explore, with some making it into productive lives in business, the military, or other enterprises. Some however, fail to thrive, for many reasons.

Those who successfully make the transition from school to work might find employment in a business setting. Maubach's experiences and study of a small business, somewhat disguised to protect identities again, is revealing of what probably constitutes the lives and work of a majority of Palmerston North residents. A good job, in a small business, entitles the person to live well by contributing something meaningful to the larger community through making or providing products or services. The challenges of running or working in a small business are many, and yet, the community depends upon such people and businesses each and every day. The community would collapse without small business, in more ways than one.

Another outcome after school for many, especially males but increasingly young women, is a tour of training and duty within the military forces. A significant number make the military their lifelong career as well, for New Zealand's army, air force, and navy are well known in peace-keeper and other roles around the world. Palmerston North now has the largest military base, Linton Camp, in New Zealand. Gregory explores what life is like for those who live within the military camp housing area. Innovative and helpful programs stem from the community services officer to brighten the sometimes routine, often difficult, and always challenging military oriented life-style offered by the army and its adjacent camp. Ties of military families to the Palmerston North community are many and

complex, from celebrations upon departure for a tour of duty and later return to policy moves to integrate military families into the larger community, to possible protection in time of war.

One of the places or activities that some younger Palmerston North residents move to when they are less than successful in their schooling and search for steady jobs or employment, is to join a gang. Morris examines one gang, purposely heavily disguised here to protect privacy, identities and confidentiality. With two gang-related murders during the past year in the city, gang tensions are many, and significant, so her exploration of this aspect of the Palmerston North community was probably the most challenging task of all.

Gangs, according to Martin Kay (2002, P. B7) "have been part of New Zealand's criminal landscape since at least 1961, when the first chapter of the infamous Hells Angels to be formed outside the United States was set up in Auckland." Kay continues to note that a survey dating from 1995 estimated 10,000 patched, associate and prospective members in gangs in New Zealand, and he stated that they can be divided into outlaw motorcycle gangs, ethnic gangs, and smaller, family-based gangs. The benefits of gang membership are rarely mentioned in the media, however, nor are the motives, values, and life-styles of those who belong. Balanced reporting, as well as at least a degree of participant-observation, is rare, for the emotional reactions by most members of a community to gangs are like those associated with the hard drug scene. Morris has some positive affection for the members of gangs, and the roles of gangs within a larger community, and she shares some findings, and astute points of view, on the lives and activities of the members of one gang.

Associated with gangs in New Zealand as well as increasing on its own, is a rampant drug scene. Long accustomed to "beer barons" and heavy use of alcohol, New Zealanders have adopted the new technologies of pharmaceutical, botanical, and chemical products, both legal and illegal, with a vengeance and a passion. Aitken found a new perspective when he joined up to observe an agency that deals with people, especially young people congregating in The Square on weekend evenings to use and abuse and create additional problems with both alcohol and drugs. The physical, psychological, social, and recreational needs of young people in the

city, whether identified or covert, were and are many. The motives and values of the helpers that Aitken joined appear sound and valuable. The surprise for him, however, was that the two groupings, the helpers and those with problems, constitute two quite remarkably separate and divergent parts of this one community that are related through the transactions of giving and accepting help. He seems to be asking, "could more be accomplished in alternative ways, above and beyond the proffering and reception of help in the form of bread, soup, and rides?" He also implicitly is asking, "should more be accomplished?"

Communities are indeed divided, by socio-economic status, and as well, by many other factors. Too often, these divisions are crystallized so that individuals are locked into a "place" from which they cannot move or feel empathy for those who happen to be different, or who happen to occupy different niches within a larger community. Palmerston North is clearly a divided community, like every other, and socio-economic realities serve to split not only this city, but the country and indeed, our world. Resolution of the drug problem, like the sadness, sickness, and expensive problems created by alcohol, is not likely in the near future, but efforts to prevent, rehabilitate, and provide alternatives are several. Of course, some of the issues relate to self-medication for traumas suffered, others to personality, peer group, and even genetic differences that lead to alcohol and drugs. One wonders though, if surface level social change or deep structural social changes can bring about significant alterations in consumption patterns. Particularly questions arise when we realize that drugs and alcohol are deeply embedded into sports advertising and activities, politics and the taxation schemes that enrich the government, and policing and filling up courts and prisons.

White studied a local mental health program. Those with psychiatric and psychological problems are frequently welcomed into a network of caring, treatment, and rehabilitation services. However, others are pushed into making use of these services because they have and/or create problems in the everyday regularities of daily life. Mental health staff in New Zealand do the very best they can under sometimes difficult working situations, at least as reported in the newspapers, over talkback radio, and in occasional television documentaries. The inequalities

between a hierarchically arrayed staff and patients, the complex relationships between people separated by professional role and illness, make for at the least, interesting interactions. The inside information about the operations of this program, along with insights into the potentials and realities created by mental illness, enables the author, and thereby us, to see some of what really takes place. New Zealand prides itself as a "sporting nation" and resources for rugby and other major sports are always sufficient. However, resources and funding for mental health prevention, treatment, and care are rarely available according to obvious needs. Fortunately in Palmerston North, the expertise available outweighs the difficulties.

In continuing to follow the developmental trail, the shift from school to work to differentiated occupations and varied types of participation in the community may be followed by old age, or the onset of disability. Either may force us into residing in a care-giving special facility. Holdaway examined the situation of the elderly with impairments, and the care-givers, finding some with and some without power. She looked particularly at their inter-personal relationships. She chose a rest home, where the varying skill levels of staff, and situations, personalities, and abilities of residents, appear to mirror the power structures of primary and secondary school, the occupational hierarchies of business, military, or gang membership, and the social structures of human communities. For those still trying to live, as well as those waiting to die, the scope and size of "community" has diminished, but even then, the impact of values and beliefs held by those in the larger community, have a profound effect.

Finally, Hollis describes the cultural beliefs and values that underlie the Piki Kotuku Te Awhi Hinengaro program, a Tikanga Maori community for those with drug and alcohol and related problems. Rather than take us into the specifics of people and activities, she focuses on the culture, the beliefs, the directions, and the values surrounding current efforts to revitalize the people and their social institutions. Rebuilding a partially broken culture is a major task, but when, not if, that process succeeds in Aotearoa, the potential results are enormous. Without such major political, social, and economic changes, the effect of working with individuals alone would and could not amount to significant

change. Her chapter brings us to the realization that individual oriented approaches alone are weak and in the longer term, unsustainable. Thus we have come full circle to gain an understanding that community is something more than just individuals and further, that the Maori traditions and history can now help guide New Zealand people to a new renaissance and a rapprochement with nature and place.

KEY WORDS Human Ecology. Community. Conceptual Frameworks. Development

ABSTRACTS Those intrigued by the study of human ecology might well enter into a community of people and chart what they observe, then look at the groupings and networks, hierarchies and followers, and leaders and outcasts, and finally define the structure and dynamics of social, economic, political, and spiritual life. Roles, gender, sex, ethnicity, culture, lifestyle, power, and wealth serve to unite and yet also serve to divide. This article presents a brief conceptual framework, and then describes the explorations and academic work of ten university students, who in the processes of examining various sub-communities, became colleagues and community psychologists. The community, Palmerston North, New Zealand, is well organised, diverse, and ever fascinating. The parts of this community chosen for study cover a wide range, and appear here aligned in a developmental sequence, running from primary and secondary education through work, the military, and then many other alternative situations.

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