

Linking Insiders with Outsiders: Going to and Beyond the Edges of Human Ecology

Robert J. Gregory

School of Psychology, Massey University Palmerston North, New Zealand

Phone: 64 6 350-5799 extension 2053; Fax: 64 6 350-5673;

E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

KEYWORDS Prison. Ecology. Community. Social Change

ABSTRACT Ecology is about the relationships between diverse entities, human ecology concerns the links between diverse groupings of people. This case study of a prison population and an intervention reveals that ecological thinking can be useful to understand, and then to change the structural and dynamic relationships between members of the free community and those resident in a prison setting. Human ecology then in addition to being a research enterprise, becomes an approach to create effective social change.

INTRODUCTION

Human ecology is often said to concern relationships, as in everything is related to something else. Another shade of the meaning of ecology, according to Beal (http://www.coa.edu/publications/chance_change/beal.html) rests on three key variables: "population, resources, and culture". By focusing on these variables, "human ecologists' often come to a similar set of values and assumptions concerning the impact of humans on the environment and other species. Principal among these are: 1) that diversity is a valuable aspect." Accordingly, those intrigued by exploring the human ecological situation might well look to both relationships and diversity. Examining the "edges" of what is familiar and the nature of populations, resources, and cultures on the fringes of their everyday community reveals relationships or lack of relationships between a core and a periphery. But going beyond human ecology in another way too, is a possibility. Human ecology is often regarded as research, and while research or study is inherently valuable and appreciated, interventions and creating changes in what is found, takes a significant step beyond the usual interpretations of what is regarded as "human ecology". This article then, is an exploration of what lies on or even beyond the edge of typical human communities, to places rarely visited, to see if bridges could be built to link outsiders with insiders, and insiders with outsiders.

PRISONS

The dividing line between those in prisons

and those on the outside is usually clear, in the minds and lives of most people. People in the free community typically think that the dividing line is crystal clear, but others, more aware, appreciate that there are close links sometimes, what with innocents being locked up, and with guilty parties being free. Further, there may be other ties, for example guards, trustees, families of inmates and occasional visitors are inextricably linked across the boundaries. For me, with anthropology training in my background, I had to see the inside for myself. I had plenty of questions, and more than a few opinions.

Prison may be a realistic answer for those few who truly cannot be released back into society. But, I wanted to see for myself. Given the opportunity, I knew that words, films, videos, or hearsay cannot compete with actually being in a strange land, seeing and feeling what "the natives" do.

Perhaps my background led me in this direction. I ran a mental health program, and then later switched to direct a community based substance abuse program in a southeastern city in the United States. Through the mental health and drug scene I knew more than a few people who, inevitably it seemed, ended up in the prison system. Eventually, a woman, who had called me a "friend" from my work with people on the streets, ended up in state prison. She, two other junkies (heroin addicts), and a paperhanger (fraudulent check writer) invited me to visit, claiming, "there are no rehabilitation programs available." They knew that I was a so-called expert in rehabilitation.

As expert as I may have been, I had little real knowledge of what a prison was really like.

But, with the permission and indeed, gratitude, of the superintendent, I met with them, talked for an hour, and we set up Wednesday evening meetings, just them and me. I suspect the superintendent recognized that since rehabilitation programs were not available, that my voluntary visiting just might be useful.

Following principles and practices of human ecology, I looked at the population, the resources and then the culture. That first Wednesday evening meeting revealed how utterly bleak the setting was. Women's prison housed around 400 inmates, "the worst female criminals in the state", said one of the guards. About 70 inmates were allocated per cage, with 35 double bunk beds neatly arrayed around the perimeter of each "room". At one end of the wire mesh stood a television set, covered with still more wire mesh and at a height that prevented channel changing or volume adjusting. That was all there was!

Inmates who "behaved" were released from their cages during the day to work in the laundry, a hot sweatshop where steam, heat, and guards conspired to break the spirits of any and all. On the other hand, the laundry was a privilege and a big step up from staying in one of the cages, all day, every day. My initial thought was that a day in that situation might be possible, but more than that, no one could remain sane. I was not positively impressed with the available population and resources, so I turned to explore the culture.

Wednesday evening, and about ten girls and a couple of guards showed up. I remember saying to them, "well, I really don't know much about this place, and to work with you to set up a rehabilitation type program, I need to learn. Tell me, what is it all about?" That initial evening, I listened for two hours to tales of life behind bars. Subordination to guards wishes and whims, to internal bullies, and to the system was one theme, while another theme focused on relationships, friends, and networks of those who were like-minded to make the time go smoother. Still another constant seemed to be the expectations that "being out" would be best, the sooner the better. However, being out in the free community without skills, resources, or friends was unlikely to be productive. They knew that. I knew that too. Still, the human spirit is hard to extinguish, and even in this stark setting, I found that some women were surviving through writing poetry, networking with each other, and

spreading kindness so far as possible. Virtually all had great expectations for something more in life when they were discharged, but, based on past records and collective memories, few would succeed.

At the second Wednesday evening, the numbers increased. The stories continued, but seemed richer, more reflective. The women explained, "the presence of guards and stoolies made it difficult to talk last week." They added that, "we took care to see that there are no stoolies present tonight." The one guard in attendance blanched a bit at that statement, eventually turned and smiled at me, and then, knowing she was not wanted, departed. She was by that time, however, fully satisfied that I would not pose any threat to order and security, nor would I be harmed.

And so, the inmates and I sat and just talked. I shared that, "rehabilitation is a process," starting with a recognition that "here you are, and in something less than the best condition, but there is someplace you could be that just might be better, and you need to make a decision to try to get there. That personal decision is the beginning of rehabilitation. Others are not going to do much for you, the task is over to you. After you learn that, you have to seek resources, and you have to change ways of thinking and behaving so as to get what you want." They countered with more descriptions about their role, their temporary home and their past. They described how a dominance hierarchy ruled in the prison, and the physically stronger you were, the more powerful you might be in the eyes of others. But, in addition to that, the more friends you had, the better off you would be for even the weakest gangs internal to the prison had far more power than any individual. And, to protect yourself, you joined a gang, or at a minimum, a twosome, to have "family."

Yes, some inmates were lesbian, not all. And those who were, more than likely, were lesbian because of the lack of available males in their world. A few were lesbian by choice and lifestyle. Others had no grudges against the lesbians, nor did the lesbians have any antagonism against the others; survival was a far more important and basic issue for all.

The guards were mainly female, but a few were male, and yet most of them, male or female, could not be manipulated. The boundary lines between inmates and guards were strictly

enforced, contrary to media reports, speculation, and rumors. I am sure there might have been exceptions, but they would have been rare. Visitors were appreciated, but they had little opportunity to share an hour per week for the lucky ones, as little as an hour per year or less for the unlucky women whose families rejected them or denied their existence.

I began to learn even more about their backgrounds in subsequent meetings, and the numbers attending Wednesday evening meetings swelled. Social class was certainly most important, but race, broken homes, and lack of role models were factors that led many to prison. Errant boyfriends, peer group pressures, and the ready availability of heroin led many to the prison. Any lack of resources, financial and friends, was a sure way to be pronounced guilty in courts, and the legal system had obvious biases. Most but not all were black, poor, from broken homes, relatively poorly educated, often addicted to heroin, and unable to conform to "standards" of society. Little wonder that they ended up in state prison. No one on the outside was interested in looking at structural discrimination, poverty and the associated rich-poor gap, the failures of the educational system, nor the flood of heroin back then from Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, probably some courtesy of the United States government and its secret agencies.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM: INTERVENTIONS

After several months, I began to appreciate their situation and had some understanding of their culture. Personally, I felt sad, angry, and upset. But, I had to get beyond problems and my feelings. Now, rather than listen to more problems, I asked them, what could be done? Eventually, with their involvement in discussions, we planned multiple strategies (Gregory, 1974). For the majority, we would continue Wednesday evening meetings, but I would bring in some guest speakers to listen and learn as I had, and just perhaps, some of them might not only entertain, but take an active role in making a difference. For those who had been or were addicted and the addiction dominated their lives, we would develop an encounter group approach to deal with personal problems and heroin addiction.

Among subsequent visitors and guests, I brought in an attorney, a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a newspaper reporter, a female Christian minister, a black activist, a musician, and a couple who were teachers of yoga. The prisoners listened and learned, and challenged the visitors to explain their role, life situation, and beliefs. Each visitor listened, talked about their background and point of view, related at least somewhat on an emotional level, and listened and learned. Some came up with great ideas, for example, the lawyer promised to help create a small law book library, the yoga couple taught meditation techniques, and the newspaper reporter challenged the inmates to generate spontaneous scripts of their lives, then produce a play.

The play led the assistant superintendent to become a stage manager, and then to state prison officials viewing a trial run, and performances first for other inmates, then at least a hundred teachers, and finally, a special program in the community for some 400 or so community leaders (Gregory and Johnson, 1976-1977; Gregory, 1995). During the latter show, I sat in the back row with tears of joy freely running down my face. The transformation I witnessed was one of the happiest moments in my life.

The encounter group was run with indirect help from a psychiatrist (Gregory and Carter, 1972), as a former male prisoner under his supervision and direction, led the therapeutic groups. In addition, the state vocational rehabilitation program offered a place and some solid help. The initial six volunteers were pleased with the project, and each made good progress. A second group of six began, although success rates were not quite as good. But we were learning.

Another project we eventually designed and developed involved several members of a women's club in the community (Gregory, 1996). After some discussions and training sessions, about six middle to upper middle class women volunteered to take an inmate for visits to the community: to go shopping, to see a movie, to enjoy a home cooked meal, or to just sit and talk for an evening on the outside. We provided some training and preparation for the inmates, a guided match-up, and supervision of the process. Almost all participants were extremely pleased with the adventure and the outcome of these visits.

Overall, even as an outsider, I listened and learned, and I was able to bring in other outsiders

who also listened and learned. The programs we generated were small, but important to us. Most of all, the efforts we made resulted in a difference for at least some inmates. Too, those I brought in from the free community changed in their attitudes, and in their subsequent behavior. They were more likely to get involved, to engage with those who society relegates to the fringes. For those in or out of prison, this example of a project might offer ideas as to what can be accomplished when insiders and outsiders team up to try to create positive change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study of human ecology can lead to exploration of the relationships and diversity of human beings, both in population terms and in settings. Further, human ecology can offer useful information and research. But going beyond these basics can lead to creative ways to intervene, activism of a special sort. Bridges can be built between different parts of a community of people, sufficient to change the structure and "system." In this case as reported, insiders of a marginalized population encoura-

ged an outsider who was actually centered within the community to join with them, then get educated and dialogue. Together, there was an opportunity to create projects that enabled, encouraged, and built bridges.

Initiatives can begin from deep within a community, or from the fringes on the outside. The more important thing is that all members of human communities learn to join and work together to make good things happen.

REFERENCES

- Beal, E. Jr. Human Culture and Ecology - A Context for Choice
http://www.coa.edu/publications/chance_change/beal.html, accessed 14 August 2003.
- Gregory, R. J. and Carter, J. H.: A residential treatment program for addicted persons. *Inventory*, **XXI (4)**: 6-9 (1972).
- Gregory, R. J.: A community based prison program for drug offenders. *Drug Forum*, **IV(1)**: 1, 31-37 (1974).
- Gregory, R. J. and Johnson, J. S.: The beginning of the end: A prison play to rehabilitate people. *Drug Forum*, **V(4)**: 289-296 (1976-1977).
- Gregory, R. J.: Junkie Script. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, **22 (1/2)**: 157-163 (1995).
- Gregory, R. J.: Betty and Pat: Matching opposites as a technique toward community involvement in offender rehabilitation. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, **23 (1/2)**: 111-116 (1996).