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Book review

Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets, John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight

Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research,
Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA;
1993, 376 pp.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) believe that communities contain untapped resources and supports that often go unrecognized because of society's tendency to focus on the needs and deficiencies that exist within most communities. The perceptions each of us hold about the capabilities of regeneration from within are clouded by our tendencies to view our communities in stereotypic ways. Much of the media portrays a more pessimistic outlook toward the capacity of community members to support one another. The content on page one of most city-wide newspapers is more apt to focus on a need or deficiency within one's community while news about community members supporting other community members lies buried on page C-24. This book highlights the stories of successful partnerships among community members. Some general principles of forging these partnerships are provided and will be of immense benefit to those of us who are helping people attain quality-of-life outcomes through these connections in the community.

The general highlights of this book

The main focus of the book is on recognizing the capacities of individuals and associations

within one's community and developing partnerships in which all parties benefit from a newly-formed relationship.

A common strategy throughout is the process of mapping the assets within the community. Mapping consists of the identification of the gifts of individuals, resources within citizens' associations, and supports from local institutions including businesses, schools, libraries, parks, hospitals and community colleges.

Samples of interview questionnaires, diagrams of how connections have occurred and summary accounts of these connections abound in each section of the book.

The section headings capture the essence of the six related themes toward recognizing and developing natural supports within one's community:

- Releasing individual capacities
- Releasing the power of local associations and organizations
- Capturing local institutions for community building
- Rebuilding the community economy
- Asset-based community development: mobilizing an entire community
- Providing support for asset-based development: policies and guidelines

Names and addresses of contact people who have contributed stories of positive connections are included at the end of most sections of the book.

Traditionally, people who are labelled in our society are done so to point out their needs and

they are stereotyped by that label. The emphasis of this book is that all individuals, regardless of their known labels, have capacities to contribute to the growth of their community. The sharing of gifts and talents begins with this recognition.

There is enough repetition within each section that the book does not need to be read in its presented order. If the reader is interested in how to better connect youths, seniors, people with disabilities etc., they may investigate recommended strategies within that section.

Specific areas of excellence

Each of the sections in part 1 and 2 of this book contain a four-part sequence of steps toward mapping community assets and developing partnerships:

- Make a thorough ‘capacity inventory’ outlining all the various skills and assets for the focus group under consideration.
- Compile an inventory of the key assets and resources of the community in which the focus group resides. This inventory will include information from: (a) citizen associations and not-for-profit organizations; (b) publicly-funded institutions such as hospitals, parks, libraries and schools; (c) the private sector including small businesses, banks and local branches of larger corporations and; (d) local residents and special interest groups of labelled people such as ‘seniors,’ ‘people with disabilities,’ and ‘artists’.
- Use the information from these inventories to build strong, concrete, mutually-beneficial partnerships.
- On the basis of these new partnerships, go on to build new relationships with resources that exist outside the immediate community.

‘Nonetheless, every living person has some gift or capacity of value to others. A strong community is a place that recognizes those gifts and ensures that they are given’ (p. 27). Future planning, career planning, mapping or other titles are

ascribed to methods for identifying the strengths, skills, gifts, and talents of individuals with disabilities. Through these procedures, a picture of the focused person emerges based on capacity building and not on deficiency replacement.

‘Several churches are developing relationships with habitat for humanity, in which they assist in the construction of affordable housing for their communities’ (p. 152). Projects within communities where a blending of talents and skills exist are good places for community members of varying skills to contribute to the general production of a common goal. Distributing sandwiches, carrying supplies and being an assistant to a skilled crafts person can be indispensable contributions by individuals who are typically thought not capable of participating in the process of building or renovating homes.

‘In every instance, the most vital and powerful parks are those that have formed strong, concrete partnerships with the widest range of individuals, associations and institutions in the neighborhood’ (p. 177). Diversity enhancement means bringing together citizens who bring untapped resources in a position to help each other achieve an established outcome of value to the local community.

‘In partnerships like these, both partners in the relationship win, and when this happens, a strong incentive is created to build further on these relationships and establish new projects that will continue to enhance the community’ (p. 167). By starting small and building connections between individuals with disabilities and people, associations, events and larger community entities, we can set the wheels in motion for deepening of a relationship that would not have occurred without our initial efforts.

One especially ingenious strategy mentioned in the book is a recommendation for how to locate the associations that exist in many communities but that are not initially very visible. The authors noted that in Wisconsin there was a project by the Department of Transportation to adopt a highway. An association’s name is inscribed on a sign on a highway, a stretch of which members

agree to maintain four or so times a year. By contacting the Department of Transportation, you can obtain an entire list of these associations and determine if a local chapter exists in your community.

‘By bringing a source of meaningful connection and hope to an isolated, marginalized individual, we not only increase their personal happiness but also at the same time add greatly to our own’ (p. 70). The authors emphasize that many people have been labeled because of their deficiencies and needs. They refer to people with disabilities as marginalized individuals; people who are at the fringes of our society. It is only when members of society see these individuals for the talents and capacities they possess that a mutually-beneficial relationship can be established in which all members of a community benefit.

‘In every one of these instances, joint planning that makes the most effective use of contrasting strengths and resources has been able to find ways to make both parties twice as strong as when they operated in isolation’ (p. 202). This synergy occurs when all members of a community recognize the capacities within its members and maximize this pool of resources when developing partnerships with each other.

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced

The very last quote in the book on page 376 sums up how we can enhance the content of this publication. ‘We make the path by walking it.’ Each of us needs to be conscious of how parts of our communities can be connected in partnership with each other in ways that the gifts and talents of each member of the community are brought out and appreciated. We can increase the probability that mutually-beneficial relationships will occur by increasing the connection of positive contact.

Conduct a capacities inventory using the strategies recommended in the publication. Compare the results to the traditional information contained in the permanent file of a person you support. The difference in approaching that per-

son’s future will probably be in sharp contrast based on what information is used as a profile from which to make decisions of support in the community.

Read the community change literature to look for generic support that exists in communities for the benefit of all its citizens. Begin to focus on support structures that don’t have people with disabilities as their primary focus. Instead, include the people you support as viable contacts from the perspective of a fellow citizen with competence, gifts and talent instead of a person labelled with needs and deficiencies.

Common threads throughout this publication

All people within a community have gifts, talents and capacities upon which to build relationships with others. One of our roles is to develop better ways to recognize these strengths and use them as avenues for successful connections to more natural sources of support in our communities.

Successful connections abound throughout the book. This publication is more of a book of experiences when relationships and partnerships occur within communities and how these partnerships provide mutual benefits and satisfaction for all parties involved.

Most associations were originally developed for specific purposes and areas of concentration. One key strategy is to assist these associations to consider community building and the full inclusion of all citizens within that community as an ongoing commitment as well.

Recommendations of its utility to rehabilitation professionals

Those of us who assist individuals with disabilities to establish more meaningful connections in their communities have an ability to reframe our outlook in capacities and strengths — both of the person we support and the various groups, associations, and other entities in our communities.

Formal supports funded through established

agencies and programs in the community may be a model whose final days are close at hand. In the wings, under the banner of self-determination and choice, rests a new paradigm of how current receivers of supports will gain more control of the financial resources currently directed to agencies. During this next age of empowerment, those of us who support these individuals need to recognize that the entire community is a source of support and that specialty assistance may be needed only after community members have not figured out for themselves how to celebrate the capacities,

talents, and gifts of its fellow community members.

Rehabilitation counselors can use the mapping strategies recommended in this publication for identifying the capacities for people they support as well as potential partners in the community including associations, businesses, community colleges, banks, libraries and other private/public institutions.

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