

Relational Dialectics in Community-Rooted Research and Partnerships [†]

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[†] Presented at the 2nd International Electronic Conference on Environmental Health Sciences, 4–29 November 2019; Available online: <https://iecehs-2.sciforum.net/>.

Published: 5 November 2019

Abstract: Improving health equity as well as overall community health rests in large part on partnerships, especially those between researchers and community members and groups. Employing the theory of relational dialectics, we analyze relationships in an interdisciplinary research project examining how community health is influenced by increases in neighborhood greening. Relational dialectics posits that opposing tensions, such as desires not only to be connected but also to remain independent, shape relationships and are evidenced and negotiated through communication. We provide examples of dialectical tensions in a community-rooted research project and lessons that we have learned from this work.

Keywords: relational dialectics; health disparities; health equity; residential greening; community engagement; community partnerships; communication

1. Introduction

Addressing environmental health disparities and improving health equity as well as overall community health rests in large part on partnerships, especially those between researchers and community members and groups. Employing the theory of relational dialectics, we analyze relationships in a large, interdisciplinary research project examining how community health is influenced by increases in neighborhood greening (e.g., planting trees, shrubs, and grasses). Understanding such dynamics in partnerships is vital to success in sustaining relationships across time and in achieving mutual goals.

The theory of relational dialectics posits that, as we engage in relationships with others, opposing tensions shape our interactions [1–3]. As Bakhtin suggested, these opposing pulls occur due to the multiple goals and needs of relational partners and are evidenced through communication with others. Rather than “either/or” viewpoints, relational partners have “both/and” perspectives, where differing feelings exist simultaneously (e.g., desires for both interdependence and separateness) [4]. Through communication, relational partners negotiate these competing dialectics. As discussed in the communication and related literature, examples of such dialectics include separateness–connectedness, certainty–uncertainty, openness–closedness, and equality–inequality [5].

Relational dialectics theory recognizes that meaning is created through communication and that our discourse is often rife with expressions that are in opposition to each other or that display competing sentiments [6]. For example, a community member might express how much she values a partnership with a research group and might also indicate that she would prefer to focus more on her own social change goals (evidencing a dialectical tension between joint collaboration and individual undertakings). From a relational dialectic perspective, the discursive tensions are foregrounded. Such dialectics are not regarded as negative or problematic—rather, they are normal and inescapable [6]. In reality, these tensions result from a complex set of individual goals and are evidenced as relational partners interrelate to try to achieve both individual and joint goals.

During a multi-year study, a number of partnerships were developed between research team members and individuals residing in focal communities. Compared to several other areas of the city, the focal communities tended to be low-socioeconomic status, located near an interstate, relatively high in crime, and low in overall greenness (e.g., tree canopy). Examples of partnerships include development of a Community Advisory Board, work with neighborhood associations and schools, and collaborations with community groups and city council members. At present, the research has been underway for approximately 18 months and community–university relationships continue to increase in number and strength. In the next section, we provide some examples of current relational dialectics and how these have shaped communication and influenced the ongoing research.

2. Dialectics in Action

As partnerships are formed and relationships are cemented, individuals come to better understand each other and their interests. Thus, it is not surprising that, as one grows more familiar with and becomes more enmeshed in a community, one would come to recognize some of its needs. Further, as one comes to know members of the community, one would likely become familiar with their wishes and goals for their community and one may want to provide assistance in reaching these goals. Simultaneously, however, in many types of research projects, the main goal resides in the study's specific aims. One relational dialectic that created pulls within our research team was trying to balance a focus on our research goals with a desire to help community members and community organizations achieve their goals. When possible, we would blend the two areas of emphasis, but that was not always achievable (e.g., community requests might fall in areas that we did not have funding to cover).

Similarly, another relational dialectic pitted desires to maintain academic distance (e.g., more objectivity) with wants to be accepted by and into the community (e.g., membership). We are fortunate to be working with a number of passionate, friendly community members and groups, which continues to fuel desires to assist, as mentioned above, and desires to feel like part of the group. Such dialectical tensions have arisen in our research team regarding tasks and projects that we might undertake in the community.

In each of these examples, the competing wants of inclusion–exclusion and independent–interdependent functioning are at play. As we worked to navigate the tensions between multiple, simultaneous goals, we learned more about ourselves, our team, our partnerships, and community-rooted research.

3. Lessons Learned

Across the past months, we have learned to embrace these dialectical tensions in our research team and to discuss underlying viewpoints when differing tendencies are evidenced. As noted above, such discussions deepen our overall understanding of our team members, the focal communities, the partnerships we have forged, and the multiple “pulls and tugs” that simultaneously influence our communication. Importantly, through these processes, we also come to understand ourselves and our layered goals in more detailed ways. We have also learned that community-rooted research endeavors continue to help us develop as researchers and as change agents as well as to learn how to better balance competing demands surrounding this type of work.

4. Conclusions

Across all relationships, dialectics shape communication. These competing tendencies reflect the complexity of human viewpoints and wants (e.g., desires to be independent and interdependent). As one builds community partnerships, it is important to be aware of relational dialectics—in terms of the influence on one's self, the research team, interactions with community partners, and achieving overarching goals. Awareness in these areas and an openness to navigate solutions with one's team and community partners is important in building trust, in addressing health disparities, and in ultimately contributing to community health overall.

Author Contributions: All authors participated in conceptualization, analysis, and review. J.L.H. and K.L.W. prepared the original written draft.

Funding: This work was supported, in part, by grants from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences ES 029846 and The Nature Conservancy, as well as the Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute and the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville.

Acknowledgments: We wish to thank Shelby Carter, Angel Thornsberry, Savanna Kerstiens, Grace Roth, Allison Spicer, and several other talented undergraduates who assisted with community meetings and the overall research project. We also extend thanks to Lindsay K. Tompkins for contributions in many project areas.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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