TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO ACTION: INVESTIGATING THE ‘DISCONNECT’ BETWEEN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP AND REAL WORLD APPLICATION

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Community development in the United States remains a challenge both for practitioners and local communities, despite on-going research and efforts to improve the quality of life in distressed communities. Attaining sustainable community development is a complex and often difficult goal, and the underutilization of academic research in real world community development work continues to be an obstacle to achieving it. The aim of this thesis is to identify the potential reasons for, and solutions to, the gap that exists between available scholarship and its application in the real world. For the purpose of this research, this gap is conceptualized as a ‘disconnect’ between available scholarship and the application of that scholarship to community development practice and community decision-making.

In order to better understand this ‘disconnect’ in terms of potential contributing factors and possible solutions, this thesis incorporates two separate, but complementary,
literature reviews and a set of structured interviews with community development scholars. The initial literature review examined a range of community development scholarship in an attempt to identify potential factors contributing to the ‘disconnect.’ The secondary literature review focused on identifying potential ways to mitigate, or even eliminate, these factors. Finally, the interviews with community development scholars were intended to provide real world insights into the ‘disconnect’ and its impact on community development practice and sustainable community development outcomes.

If factors contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between scholarship and practice can be identified, a more comprehensive understanding of the role that community development scholarship may or may not play in community development practice could result – which, in turn, should contribute to more effective and sustainable community development over time.

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Introduction

Community development in the United States remains a challenge both for practitioners and local communities, despite on-going research and efforts to improve the quality of life in distressed communities. Attaining sustainable community development is a complex and often difficult goal, and the underutilization of academic research in real world community development work continues to be an obstacle to achieving it. The aim of this thesis is to identify the potential reasons for, and solutions to, the gap that exists between available scholarship and its application in the real world. For the purpose of this research, this gap is conceptualized as a ‘disconnect’ between available scholarship and the application of that scholarship to community development practice and community decision-making.

In order to better understand this ‘disconnect’ in terms of potential contributing factors and possible solutions, this thesis incorporates two separate, but complementary, literature reviews and a set of structured interviews with community development scholars. The initial literature review examined a range of community development scholarship in an attempt to identify potential factors contributing to the ‘disconnect.’

The secondary literature review focused on identifying potential ways to mitigate, or even eliminate, these factors. Finally, the interviews with community development scholars were intended to provide real world insights into the ‘disconnect’ and its impact on community development practice and sustainable community development outcomes.

If factors contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between scholarship and practice can be identified, a more comprehensive understanding of the role that community development scholarship may or may not play in community development practice could result –
which, in turn, should contribute to more effective and sustainable community
development over time.

**Initial Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to examine scholarly literature in the field
of community development in order to gain a deeper understanding of the potential
reasons for the ‘disconnect’ between academic research and real-world community
development efforts. More specifically, the ‘disconnect’ can be understood as the gap
between the availability of expert community development scholarship and the
application of that scholarship and expertise in community development practice and
community decision-making. In spite of myriad on-going efforts to address the
development of distressed communities, achieving sustainable community development
has remained a struggle for many communities – in part because involving communities
in the community development process continues to be an ongoing challenge.¹

This literature review seeks to understand the reasons why expert knowledge is
not more often or effectively utilized by communities, community development
professionals, and expert scholars to facilitate real-world development activities. This
‘disconnect’ often appears to keep community development efforts from being as
effective and sustainable as they could be otherwise. An examination of the scholarly
literature should help identify the factors contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between the
availability of academic research and its application in real-world community
development practice.

¹ David Matarrita-Cascante and Mark A. Brennan, "Conceptualizing Community Development in
the Twenty-First Century," *Community Development* 43, no. 3 (2012): 301.
The literature selected for this review comprised peer-reviewed articles and books written by prominent scholars. Search keywords included: community development, participation, participatory research, economic development, practitioner, consultant, and knowledge translation. The following review is divided into sub-sections based on the six factors that were identified in the literature as strongly contributing to this ‘disconnect.’

These six factors can be described as:

1. Conceptualization of community development- the need to develop well understood and widely accepted community development theories and clearly defined jargon.

2. Community participation- the level and equitability of involvement by a diverse cross-section of community members in the community development process.

3. Community empowerment- the degree to which a community has ownership and agency in the initial stages and throughout the community development process.

4. Knowledge sharing- the community development practitioner’s recognition and value of all forms of knowledge present within the community and its inclusion in the community development process. Additionally, this refers to the translation of expert knowledge for the benefit of the communities’ understanding in the development process.

5. Healthy democracy- the quality of a community’s participation in civic life and community decision-making.

6. The practitioner- the role and responsibilities of the professionals and scholarly practitioners in the community development process.

While each of these factors has its own particular influence on the community development process, as the literature review will show, they are also interconnected.

1. **Conceptualization of Community Development**

   Throughout the literature scholars note a need for improved conceptualization of community development theories in order to increase the utilization of community
development theory by practitioners and unify the approaches practitioners take in their work. The field of community development is vastly interdisciplinary and, therefore, draws on theories and jargon from numerous academic disciplines. As a result of the numerous disciplines comprising the field of community development, community development practice often fails to understand and utilize community development theory sufficiently or optimally. However, while the need to improve conceptualize community development theory and better define jargon associated with both theory and practice is agreed upon, just how to do so remains unclear. For example, Ronald J. Hustedde and Jacek Ganowicz in “The Basics: What’s Essential About Theory for Community Development, Conceptualizing Community Development in the Twenty-First Century,” John Abbot in “Community Participation and Its Relationship to Development,” and Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood’s article, “Still Left Out in the Cold: Problematising Participatory Research and Development” all discuss the need for an improved conceptualization of community development and clearer definitions of commonly used community development jargon. However, they do not provide clear guidance for accomplishing this.

Hayward, Simpson, and Wood argue that “…uncritical use of development rhetoric such as ‘capacity building,’ ‘empowerment,’ and ‘participation’” has hurt community development efforts. This lack of a widely agreed upon understanding regarding the terms associated with community development practice are likely to lead to muddied ideas and uncertainty regarding best practices. Hustedde and Ganowicz write that a “[l]ack of an overarching conceptual definition and clear understanding of what

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community development entails results in a scattered literature often targeted at specific groups. It appears, then, that there is not only a need for an overarching conceptualization of community development theories, but also a need for those agreed upon concepts to be communicated clearly to community development professionals and communities seeking to address their development needs. Hustedde and Ganowicz also state that because community development is made up of so many different disciplines, varying theories “seldom cross academic boundaries.” They further add that this “…fragmentation makes it difficult to sort through what is important for community development research or practice.” Their concerns are supported by the other authors discussed in this section, who also press for the development of an agreed upon conceptualization of community development theory.

These scholars also agree that the conceptualization of community development theory may be improved by studying real world examples of community development theories in practice. Practitioners often fail to utilize community development theory in their practice; perhaps if community development theories such as functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism were conceptualized more clearly, practitioners and communities might be more likely to use them in practice. The process and practice of community development are unlikely to be optimally effective if conceptualization is not improved.

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3 Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan, "Conceptualizing Community Development," 294.  
6 Ibid.  
7 Ibid., 168.
Abbott argues that the lack of clearly conceptualized community development theory, and the definitions of associated jargon, has had major consequences for the practice of community development. An example of this is the low level of participation and lack of trust that community members often have in the development process. He argues that because community development theory has not been adequately conceptualized and common jargon has not been well defined, community development has often been “perceived as a form of manipulation…” Improvements to the conceptualization of community development theory, and the communication of that conceptualization to the communities involved in the development process, is essential to enhancing the effectiveness of community development practice.

2. Community Participation

Community participation is often viewed as a foundational element of the community development process; as a result, it is widely discussed in the literature. For this paper, selected key aspects of community participation are discussed in order to better understand the challenges they present to community development practice, and how this may contribute to the ‘disconnect’ between scholarly research and real-world community development.

How community participation is manifested, who participates, and the varying degrees to which people participate are all common themes addressed by community development scholars as they attempt to identify obstacles to successful and sustainable community development. While community development scholars discuss the role of community participation in different ways, several touch on the need for improved

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understanding of how community participation is defined and how participation might become more effective and meaningful for the whole community. Much of the literature points to a need to reexamine the degree to which community members choose to participate in community development efforts and to address false assumptions made regarding community participation.\(^9\) One assumption often made by practitioners is that community members choose to participate in community development, but this is not necessarily the case. Moreover, the literature reviewed demonstrates that community members often do not participate in community development because equitable and meaningful participation opportunities are not available to them.\(^10\)

Jules Pretty in “Participatory Learning for Sustainable Agriculture,” Lucius Botes and Dingie van Rensburg in their article, “Community Participation in Development: Nine Plagues and Twelve Commandments,” Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood in “Still Left out in the Cold: Problematizing Participatory Research and Development,” Suzy Croft and Peter Beresford’s article “The Politics of Participation,” Andrea Cornwall’s “Unpacking ‘Participation’: Models Meaning and Practices,” and Sherry R. Arnstein in “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” agree that false assumptions made by community development practitioners regarding participation have hampered successful citizen involvement in community development activities. Further, they call for a deeper examination of participation in order to address common false assumptions and develop more widely agreed upon definitions. Each of these authors explores false assumptions regarding community participation as they attempt to address the various


challenges associated with community development. For example, it is often assumed that participation is healthy and beneficial for the whole community, and that the community wants to participate; however, these authors agree with Pretty that participation often excludes most of the community.\(^1\)

The community development participation process often fails to empower community members and encourage community ownership of the community development process. When practitioners and stakeholders simply assume (and do not verify) that communities are encouraged to participate and are empowered equitably to do so, participation is unlikely to improve.\(^2\) The danger posed by the false assumptions held by community development practitioners is best described by Croft and Beresford when they write, “[p]articipatory initiatives can be a route to redistributing power, changing relationships and creating opportunities for influence. Equally they can double as a means of keeping power from people and giving a false impression of its transfer.”\(^3\) The future success of community participation depends on identifying and discarding false assumptions about community participation in the community development process.

Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood write in “Still Left Out in the Cold: Problematising Participatory Research and Development,” “…the extent to which a participatory approach may be considered useful depends to a large degree on participants, practitioners and academics developing a more critical understanding of the

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problematic nature of participatory philosophy and practice.”  

False assumptions regarding participation also touch on the question of who is participating and who is not participating. As Lucius Botes and Dingie van Rensburg in “Community Participation in Development: Nine Plagues and Twelve Commandments” and Yasminah Beebeejaun, Catherine Durose, James Rees, Joanna Richardson, and Liz Richardson in “‘Beyond text’: Exploring Ethos and Method in Co-producing Research with Communities” discuss, there is a need for practitioners to focus attention on who is and who is not participating. According to the authors, if attention is not given equally to both of these groups, exclusion of community members is inevitable - and exclusion of community members leads to distrust. These authors argue that unless more attention is paid by practitioners to the quality of participation in the communities they are working with, only a small and powerful group in the community is likely to participate in community development efforts.  

Yasminah Beebeejaun, Catherine Durose, James Rees, Joanna Richardson, and Liz Richardson argue that participatory community development efforts often fail to represent the varying goals, political views, values, and efforts of the whole community. Consequently, only those with power or privilege in the community end up participating in the development process. Their case study, “A New Company in Town,” illustrates the need for practitioners to address the varying goals, values, and political views represented in the community and describes the failure of community development efforts caused by conflicting political views and priorities held by members of the community.

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Robyn Eversole in “Remaking Participation: Challenges for Community, Development Practice” and Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood in “Still Left out in the Cold: Problematizing Participatory Research and Development,” suggest that operationalizing participation should include the questions: “why do people participate and what is the result of participation?” If this is done, it might be possible to improve participation and increasingly bring communities into partnerships with experts. Eversole also suggests that participation can be used to harm the community. She writes, “[m]any critics now show how ‘participation’ can be used as a cloak of words to disguise business as usual: to hide power inequities, gloss differences, and enable elites to pursue their own agendas.” If Eversole is correct, there is a need to operationalize participation in community development as a means to correct past community development mistakes and establish more inclusive and equitable participation going forward.

The false assumptions discussed above regarding community participation appear to have led in many cases to the exclusion of the broader community in the development process. It seems probable that, together, these false assumptions and the failure to operationalize community participation adequately have contributed to the ‘disconnect’ and have likely kept communities from utilizing expertise that might have benefited their community development efforts.

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16 Hayward, Simpson, and Wood, "Still Left out in the Cold," 98.

17 Ibid.

3. Community Empowerment

Community empowerment is at the heart of successful community development; while many scholars agree that it influences community participation, it is also discussed as an independent factor in the community development literature. If community development efforts are going to be more successful, power and its presence in the process of community development must be well understood.\textsuperscript{19}

At the center of the discussion of empowerment is Sherry R. Arnstein’s article “A Ladder of Participation,” referenced more than any other article in the literature reviewed. Arnstein conceptualizes the role that power plays not only in influencing citizens’ participation, but also in shaping the community development process itself. To summarize, Arnstein argues that participation is essentially about power and control; the degree to which citizens engage and participate in the community development process depends on the level to which they are empowered to do so.\textsuperscript{20} This concept is referenced and expanded on by Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood in their article “Still Left Out in the Cold: Problematising Participatory Research and Development,” and in Andrea Cornwall’s “Unpacking ‘Participation’: Models, Meanings and Practices,” Jules Pretty’s "Participatory Learning for Sustainable Agriculture," and “The Politics of Participation” by Suzy Croft and Peter Beresford. While Arnstein’s work is discussed in other scholarship as well, these authors pay particularly close attention to it in their discussion of empowerment and its function in community development. For example,


Jules Pretty argues that communities participate in community development only when they are empowered to do so.21 This idea expresses the essence of Arnstein’s “A Ladder of Participation.”

While there is general agreement that community empowerment is essential to effective community development, addressing the lack of empowerment remains a challenge and is an issue that is often unaddressed in the field of community development. There are, however, several authors who make suggestions regarding how best to address the lack of empowerment of community members in the community development process. For instance, Marilyn Taylor’s article “Community Participation in The Real World,” S.M. Miller and Martin Rein’s “Community Participation: Past and Future,” Zenia Kotval’s case study “The Link Between Community Development Practice and Theory: Intuitive or Irrelevant? A case study of New Britain, Connecticut,” and Mark A. Brennan and Glenn D Israel’s article “The Power of Community” all explore the challenges of community empowerment and make similar suggestions regarding how best to empower communities. Each calls for strategic community engagement efforts that involve knowledge enhancement and skills training.22 For example, Kotval writes, “[i]f the issues concerning empowerment are going to be addressed, they begin with providing communities with skills and knowledge to solve their own problems and address community concerns.”23

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Miller and Martin agree with the need for empowerment strategies, but argue that disempowerment in communities is largely due to apathy among the poor and the long history of a vertical approach to aid; that is, communities being lead through the development process, rather than being equal participants in the process. The authors’ argue that these factors have created a cycle of poverty and dependence that has, in turn, led to disempowerment in economically distressed communities.\(^{24}\) If communities are to be empowered, this cycle must be broken. They write, “[t]o break this cycle, the vigor of local democracy must be restored and this can best be accomplished by expanding the freedom and the competences of local residents to respond to their local problems.”\(^{25}\) A more strategic approach to empowerment may lead to improved quality and quantity of community participation and increasingly sustainable community development outcomes.

Glenn Laverack offers a strategy for improving community empowerment and increasing the quality and quantity of community participation in his article, “Using A ‘Domains’ Approach to Build Community Empowerment.” The Domains approach is intended to put the community development decision-making power in the hands of communities themselves, so that they might engage and organize themselves more effectively. This perspective is supported in the work of Small who suggests that, by giving communities increased decision-making authority in the development process, the imbalance of power between community development practitioners and community

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\(^{25}\) Ibid., 88.
members in the community development process will likely be mitigated.\textsuperscript{26}

Communities have often struggled to be treated as equal participants in the development process. For years the vertical approach to development established an “us and them” approach to community development.\textsuperscript{27} However, the literature shows that prioritizing citizen participation and empowerment is vital for sustainable community development.

4. Knowledge Sharing

Successful community development requires an understanding of the various types of knowledge present within the community and its inclusion in the community development process. The knowledge possessed by citizens, and the means by which they acquire it, is usually different from the knowledge possessed by academics and community development professionals.\textsuperscript{28} Robyn Eversole, in her article “Remaking Participation: Challenges for Community Development Practice,” and again in her book, \textit{Knowledge Partnering for Community Development}, as well as David Matthews, in his article “What Kind of Democracy Informs Community Development,” discuss the importance of including various forms of knowledge in the community development process. They argue that more attention needs to be given to the value of ‘citizen’ or ‘local’ knowledge and the powerful role that it can play in influencing and shaping successful community development strategies. The literature highlights the fact that, although this knowledge is powerful, it is often overlooked and undervalued in the


\textsuperscript{27} Guy Bessette, \textit{Involving the Community a Guide to Participatory Development Communication}. (Malaysia: Southbound, 2004), 19.

\textsuperscript{28} Eversole, “Remaking Participation,” 29.
community development process. Eversole explains,

Yet local knowledge does not even have common term in academic and practice literature… The general consensus is that the contextualized knowledge of local people is important. It provides different insight than the abstract knowledge of ‘experts’. Nevertheless, it is often overlooked in the development process.\(^{29}\)

In this same vein, Mathews argues that “[t]he academy’s lack of respect for the way citizens generate knowledge from their experience is ironic because there is rich academic literature on the way citizens inform their decisions, which goes back to the work of Isocrates, Thucydides, and Aristotle.”\(^{30}\) In spite of the academy’s historical focus on citizen knowledge, its inclusion in the community development process is often nonexistent, under-represented, or under-appreciated.

These same authors call for academics and professionals to focus more on how knowledge is acquired by community members and to then use this understanding to create more equitable knowledge sharing in the community development process. Eversole writes, “…development professionals working with local communities need to critically consider how they understand knowledge and its role in development processes inside and outside the so called knowledge economy.”\(^{31}\) A better understanding of “citizen” or “local” knowledge and the role that it plays in community development is fundamental for more successful and sustainable community development efforts. Knowledge partnering between community development practitioners and community members, in which the knowledge of the practitioner and the knowledge of the community are valued

\(^{29}\) Robyn Eversole, *Knowledge Partnering for Community Development* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 93.


\(^{31}\) Robyn Eversole, *Knowledge Partnering*, 92.
equally, is the future of community development and should become a primary function of community development practitioners.\textsuperscript{32}

Additionally, Yasminah Beebeejaun, Catherine Durose, James Rees, Joanna Richardson, and Liz Richardson, in “Beyond Text: Exploring Ethos and Method in Co-producing Research with Communities,” call for improved knowledge sharing through the coproduction of knowledge by community development experts and community members, explaining that improved coproduction creates “…a more equal partnership with communities and practitioners; working in a dynamic relationship to understand issues, create knowledge and then implement findings for transformational social change.”\textsuperscript{33} While these authors agree that knowledge sharing and the coproduction of knowledge are fundamental to the success of community development, not all scholars are in agreement on this point.

For example, Elizabeth McLean Petras, Elizabeth McLean, and Douglas V. Porpora, in “Participatory Research: Three Models and an Analysis,” argue for the need to protect academic knowledge from being diluted by coproduction or participatory development efforts. They claim that, while participatory research is useful for communities, it has the potential to “dumb down” the community development process.\textsuperscript{34} These authors argue further that if communities are to be partners in participatory research, the potential question and conflict arises regarding “who owns the knowledge”


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} Elizabeth McLean Petras and Douglas V. Porpora, "Participatory Research: Three Models and an Analysis," The American Sociologist 24, no. 1 (1993): 121.
produced. While the previously referenced authors do not share these concerns, it is an important perspective to note as it highlights some of the tension between communities, community development professionals, and the academy.

Knowledge, as it is commonly understood in the field of community development, is produced by experts, whether they are academics or professionals; however, this approach has frequently created inequality between practitioners and community members in community development efforts. Moreover, it has often alienated community members by overlooking the knowledge they possess. If community development is going to be more successful in the future, practitioners and academics must improve their understanding of “citizen” or “local” knowledge and how such knowledge is generated and shared within the community.

5. Healthy Democracy

Healthy democracies involve citizen participation, knowledge sharing, and empowered community members. A healthy democracy is vital to the community development process. When community members are engaged and involved in their local democracy, they have the ability to connect community members with experts and, thereby, enhance the equality of community participation. A healthy democracy not only helps shape the way community members work together, but also influences the resources they utilize, the way they work with outsiders, and the sustainability of

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35 Ibid., 122.

36 Robyn Eversole, "Remaking Participation," 32.

community development efforts.\textsuperscript{38} The following authors argue that a healthy democracy is fundamental to sustainable community development; however, many authors do not discuss the role of a healthy democracy in the community development process.

In “Towards a Robust Democracy: The Core Competencies Critical to Community Developers,” John Gruidla and Ronald Hustedde define democracy as “…the means by which people act together to solve problems and pursue common goals.”\textsuperscript{39} In “What Kind of Democracy Informs Community Development,” David Matthews adds to the previous definition that a healthy democracy also empowers the community. He writes, “…a political system where citizens generate the power to rile themselves by joining forces to solve common problems. They work through local civic organizations and through large institutions like those of government and education.”\textsuperscript{40} These definitions are helpful not only because they explain what a healthy democracy is, but also make it possible for local democracies to be strengthened and engaged in the community development process.

Additionally, the literature discusses the role that healthy democracies play in fostering inclusive and successful community development. Included in discussions of participation, power, and knowledge is the health of the community’s democracy; what it is and how it influences development. For example, in the work of John Gruidl and Ronald Hustedde, in "Towards a Robust Democracy: The Core Competencies Critical to Community Developers," in David Matthews’ article "What Kind of Democracy Informs Community Development,” in S.M. Miller and Martin Rein’s "Community Participation

\textsuperscript{38} Mathews, "What Kind of Democracy” 138.

\textsuperscript{39} Gruidl, and Hustedde, "Towards a Robust Democracy” 280.

\textsuperscript{40} Mathews, "What Kind of Democracy,” 138.
Past and Future," and in Stephen M. Wheeler’s article “Sustainability in Community Development,” the need for improved democracy as a means for improving community development outcomes is emphasized.

Miller and Rein argue, for example, that “[a]pathy among the poor prevents them from effectively demanding that the institutions which service them accommodate to their needs.”41 They argue further that “[a] vicious cycle of poverty reinforces a vicious cycle of bureaucratic dysfunction.”42 Gruidla and Hustedde contented that democracy is linked to community development, and that civic participation is declining and practitioners must better promote democracy and include marginalized members of the community.43 What this literature makes clear is that sustainable community development involves the participation of the community and, unless the community has made attempts to improve its own local democracy, community development success is less likely. Stephen M. Wheeler elaborates on this concept, arguing that “[a] healthy democracy is an important element of sustainable communities in that it can enable informed decision-making, meet the needs of diverse constituencies, and fulfill ideas of fairness and equality.”44

Based on the definitions and discussion surrounding healthy democracies presented above, it can be argued that unless a community has a healthy democracy it is unlikely to organize itself successfully to address its needs. In this case, it also may be less likely that the community will seek advice from academic scholarship or community

41 Miller and Rein, "Community Participation” 84.

42 Ibid.

43 Gruidla, and Hustedde, "Towards a Robust Democracy” 284.

6. The Practitioner

To clarify, the term ‘practitioner’ should be understood as any community development professional or academic scholar working in a real world community development capacity. Because practitioners are often viewed as outsiders, communities often feel distrustful and suspicious of utilizing their help and expertise. The role of the practitioner in the community development process, and the way that they work with communities, should be explored further for improved understanding as to why communities do not better utilize expert and academic knowledge and resources.

Practitioners are at the heart of many community development efforts, but rarely are they from within the community. The article, “Community Participation in Development: Nine plagues and twelve commandments,” by Lucius Botes and Dingie van Rensburg and Guy Bessette’s book, Involving the Community: A Guide to Participatory Development Communication, argue that the practitioner must be aware of the way he or she is viewed by the communities in which he or she is working. Bessette states that the practitioner must view the community as an equal partner in the development process in order to avoid a vertical development model that results in the practitioner simply aiding the community rather than facilitating an equitable community development process.

Similar to the previous discussion regarding the conceptualization of community development theory, the literature often calls for improved clarification of the

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45 Botes and van Rensburg, "Community Participation in Development” 42.

46 Bessette, Involving the Community, 10.
practitioners’ role in order to improve the practice of community development. Lack of clarity regarding the role and responsibilities of the practitioner has often created unnecessary strife between community development practitioners and community members. John Abbott argues, in “Community Participation and Its Relationship to Development,” that this lack of clarity has left the community development process “…open to abuse, either through co-option by privileged groups, or through destruction by those same groups, to whom it posed a threat.”

Ronald J. Hustedde and Jacek Ganowicz, in their article “The Basics: What’s Essential about Theory for Community Development,” also call for improved clarification of the role and responsibility of the community development practitioner.

Finally, in “The Link Between Community Development Practice and Theory: Intuitive or Irrelevant? A Case Study of New Britain, Connecticut,” Zenia Kotval provides real world case studies focused on the challenges faced by practitioners when they are viewed as outsiders in the community development process.

While it is generally agreed that improvement must be made to the practitioners’ role in the community development process, just how to do this remains unclear. While many authors, like those discussed above, provide suggestions for such improvements, John Gruidla and Ronald Hustedde, in “Towards a Robust Democracy: The Core Competencies Critical to Community Developers,” and John W. Vincent, in "Community Development Practice," are the only authors in the literature reviewed to discuss the need for professional standards in the field of community development, for the benefit of both the practitioner and the community. They write that “[t]here is a need for the

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community development profession to develop widely-accepted training standards and content, especially with regard to democratic practice.49 They also argue that, while there are agreed upon values in the field of community development, such as inclusion, participation, and empowerment, these values have not been translated into comprehensive standards and competencies for community development practitioners.50

Finally, although attention is given to the successes of community development, little attention has been paid to failed community development efforts. Practitioners must begin to learn from the failures of previous efforts in order to make improvements to the field of community development. In Lucius Botes and Dingie van Rensburg’s article, “Community Participation in Development: Nine Plagues and Twelve Commandments,” the authors argue for more discussion surrounding development failures, calling for more studies of what goes wrong in the community development process.51 If more attention is given to community development failures, the opportunities to enhance the field might be significant.

Conclusion

This initial literature review has shed light on key the factors contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between academic research and real-world community development efforts. It has highlighted the ways in which false assumptions held by community development professionals regarding participation and knowledge have contributed to the ‘disconnect.’ Moreover, this review has revealed the need to improve conceptualization of community development theory, as well as the important role that community empowerment and a

49 John Gruidal, and Ronald Hustedde, "Towards a Robust Democracy” 292.
50 Ibid.
51 Botes and van Rensburg, "Community Participation in Development” 43.
healthy democracy play in influencing a communities’ relationship with experts and their involvement in the community development process. Finally, the role of practitioners, both in relation to how they address these factors (or fail to do so) and in the way in which they approach communities, continues to influence the way that communities engage with experts.

Secondary Literature Review

The initial literature review identified six fundamental factors that have contributed in some way to the ‘disconnect’ between academic scholarship and community development practice: conceptualization of community development; community participation; community empowerment; knowledge sharing; healthy democracy; and the practitioner. If the goal is to foster more successful and sustainable community development going forward, the following questions arise: How can the conceptualization of community development be improved? How can more meaningful and equitable community participation take place? How can communities be better empowered? How can healthy democracies be more effectively fostered? How can practitioners be better equipped to improve community development outcomes and overcome the ‘disconnect’ between community development scholarship and real world practice? This secondary review seeks to discover what the literature proposes as potential answers to these questions, and in doing so, to understand better how the ‘disconnect’ might be overcome.

1. Conceptualization of Community Development

The need for more clearly conceptualized community development theory has been identified in the literature as one of the factors contributing to the ‘disconnect’
between community development research and practice. Community development theory is often interdisciplinary, resulting in a number of definitions and theories being associated with community development and, consequently, an imprecise understanding of community development and practice. By clarifying the conceptualization of community development theories, practitioners and community members might approach community development with a more unified understanding, avoiding the mistakes associated with a lack of understanding of theory and community development jargon.\textsuperscript{52} If community development theory is more clearly conceptualized, it should be more accessible and applicable to the work of practitioners. This, in turn, might free up practitioners to focus on new ideas and scholarship.

Several authors agree that more clearly conceptualizing community development theory is essential to improving the practice of community development; however, there remain differing opinions in the literature regarding how best accomplish this. Ronald J. Hustedde and Jacek Ganowicz, in “The Basics: What’s Essential About Theory for Community Development,” and Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood, in “Still Left Out in the Cold: Problematising Participatory Research and Development,” agree that improved conceptualization of community development theory should come from increased dialogue between community development experts and community members. Among practitioners, interest in theory has become overshadowed by a growing interest in practice; as a result, community development texts often focus on the

\textsuperscript{52} Hayward, Simpson, and Wood, "Still Left Out in the Cold," 98.
process rather than the theory that underlies much of the community development process.\textsuperscript{53}

By returning the conversation to one of theory and the practical application of theory, increased dialogue between scholars and practitioners might take place, likely leading to improved understanding among community development professionals and better community development outcomes. For example, Hustedde and Ganowicz focus on Anthony Gidden’s community development structuration theory and identify three classical community development theories essential for the practice of community development. The theories are: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. To summarize,

- **Functionalism** theory addresses the large-scale structural concerns regarding interactions among community cooperation and social cohesion. It examines the interdependent structures (relationships) within a community among community members. Functionalism is valuable to community development because in identifying the interdependent relationships within a community, it also identifies the norms and status quo of the community, thus improving the community development process.

- **Conflict theory** focuses on power and its role in shaping community life. An improved understanding and application of conflict theory should give improved insight into the existing distribution of power in a community and how to better balance the distribution of power among community members.

- **Symbolic interactionism** theory focuses on micro-interactions among individuals and small groups. By understanding the values, norms, and traditions of communities, relationships between community development experts and community members are likely to improve; thus, improving the sustainability of community development outcomes.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{53} Hustedde and Ganowicz in “The Basics” 164.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 168.
The authors contend that by applying these three theories to real world practice it will be possible to improve the practitioners’ application of theory, thus improving the conceptualizations of community development theory.55

David Matarrita-Cascantea and Mark A. Brennan, in “Conceptualizing Community Development in the Twenty-First Century,” agree with the need for improved dialogue between community development experts and community members, but view the conceptualization of community development theory differently. While the authors utilize community development theory, their approach is focused more on the various actors associated with the practice of community development. The authors argue that “[u]nderstanding the different forms of community development, and how they can complement each other, is critical for establishing future processes that try to minimize the weaknesses of each form and promote their strengths.”56 Better conceptualization of theory may improve the ‘disconnect’ between academic scholarship and real world practice by creating practical examples of community development theory in real world practice.

While the authors discussed in this section hold differing views regarding how best to improve the conceptualization of community development theory, it is clear that such improvement is essential to successful community development efforts, including the improved practice of community development practitioners.57

55 Ibid., 177.

56 Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan, “Conceptualizing Community Development,” 303.

57 Ibid., 294.
2. Community Participation

Failure to include the community in the development process has often contributed to the ‘disconnect’ between academic scholarship and real world community development practice. It is also possible that the ‘disconnect’ has contributed to the failure to include community members equitably. Enhancing community participation has become an increasingly popular strategy in community development practice. A number of authors discuss the importance of community participation in the development process and make recommendations regarding how best to improve participation for future development efforts.

Glenn Laverack, in “Using a ‘Domains’ Approach to Build Community Empowerment,” Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood, in “Still Left Out in the Cold: Problematising Participatory Research and Development,” Jules Pretty, in "Participatory Learning for Sustainable Agriculture," John Abbott, in “Community Participation and Its Relationship to Development,” and Andrea Cornwall, in “Unpacking ‘Participation’: Models, Meanings and Practices,” argue for the need to address false assumptions regarding community participation in community development and to operationalize participation more effectively in order to improve community development outcomes and the relationship between research and practice. By doing so, practitioners will pay closer attention to who is participating and why they are participating. Cornwell expands on the need for improved operationalization and clarification of community participation strategies in community development practice. Operationalization begins by clearly defining what community participation in

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community development is and identifying why people participate and what is the result of participation. Cornwell writes, “[a]n infinitely malleable concept, ‘participation’ can be used to evoke – and to signify – almost anything that involves people. As such, it can easily be reframed to meet almost any demand made of it.” Simpson and Wood also argue that practitioners and scholars need to critically challenge, and develop a better understanding of, the assumptions that underpin many participatory development projects. False assumptions, for example, that communities want to participate in development, that they are empowered simply by participating, and that broad based participation is always beneficial for the community.

Helen Matthews, in "Rebuilding Communities: A Twelve-Step Recover Approach," recommends a twelve-step recovery program for improved community participation. This approach utilizes participatory development strategies in a fashion similar to the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Matthews’ steps are as follows:


These steps express similar values and principles to the recommendations made by Susan

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59 Ibid., 98.

60 Cornwall, "Unpacking 'Participation,'" 269.

61 Hayward, Simpson, and Wood, "Still Left Out in the Cold," 105

62 Ibid.

Keefe, in *Participatory Development in Appalachia: Cultural Identity, Community, and Sustainability*, Robyn Eversole, in “Remaking Participation: Challenges for Community Development Practice,” and Sherry R. Arnstein, in "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," who all call for improvements in participation through increased community ownership and more equitable involvement of citizens in the community development process.

Arnstein’s ladder of participation addresses both the quality of community participation and the empowerment of the community in the participation process. There are eight rungs on the ladder, each rung representing a degree of participation; the bottom rung being manipulation and the highest rung, citizen control. The concepts introduced by Arnstein are repeatedly cited in the literature as fundamental to improving community participation as well as empowerment in the community development process. Keefe builds on Arnstein’s ladder and argues that when the community owns the project it becomes more invested in its long-term application and sustainability. In this scenario, the development project is likely to accomplish more, be embraced by the larger community, and be more sustainable than large-scale projects prescribed by outsiders.\(^{64}\)

Finally, Guy Bessette, in *Involving the Community: A Guide to Participatory Development Communication*, and Stephen A. Small, in “Action-Oriented Research: Strategies for Engaged Scholarship,” agree that improvements in communication between practitioners and community members is fundamental to improving community participation in the development process. Active engagement with the community and clear communication are essential for effective participation and sustainable community development.

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\(^{64}\) Susan E Keefe, introduction to *Participatory Development in Appalachia: Cultural Identity, Community, and Sustainability*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 117.
Bessette also stresses the need for open dialogue with community members. It is the responsibility of the practitioner working in the community to facilitate open and honest dialogue throughout the development process and, by doing so, to encourage more equitable and meaningful participation by the community.  

Efforts such as the “twelve steps,” the ladder of participation, addressing false assumptions, operationalizing participation, and improving communication can be made to improve the quality and sustainability of community development. The literature agrees that the responsibility lies with the practitioner to facilitate improved participation and address the issues that contribute to community development participatory challenges.

3. Community Empowerment

As the initial literature review clearly established, the ‘disconnect’ between scholarship and practice is often related to the level to which communities are empowered in the development process. The literature is in agreement that a community empowered to address its needs and take ownership in the community development process impacts the quality of interaction between expert knowledge and practice and fosters more successful community development results. The importance of empowerment is mentioned repeatedly in several of the factors discussed in this review, including a healthy democracy, community participation, and role of the practitioner. If power is essential to addressing the ‘disconnect,’ what does the literature recommend for improving and increasing the empowerment of the community?

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65 Small and Uttal, "Action-Oriented Research" 939.

66 Bessette, Involving the Community, 7.
The literature points out that improvements to community empowerment can be made through an enhanced understanding of what power is in relation to community development and by developing a deeper understanding of the role of power in community development. Mark A. Brennan and Glenn D. Israel, in the “Power of Community,” Kevin E. Pigg, in “Three faces of Empowerment: Expanding the theory of empowerment in community development,” and Glenn Laverack, in “Using a ‘Domains’ Approach to Build Community Empowerment” agree that improve the understanding of power and the role it plays in community development will enhance community development outcomes and the relationship between real world practice and scholarship.

Mark A. Brennan and Glenn D. Israel, in the “Power of Community,” also argue that understanding the distribution of power and the role that power plays in community development will better meet the needs of communities and establish community development practices that facilitate social change.67 Power influences a community’s involvement in the development process, and lack of power among community members often contributes to failed community development outcomes and possibly the failure to utilize scholarship.68 For this reason, power should be better understood in order to increase community capacity and develop community agency. Similarly, Glenn Laverack describes power through the Domains approach, stressing not only a need for improved understanding of power, but also enhanced recognition of the complexity of power and empowerment among community members. Laverack also discusses the empowerment domains as areas of influence that improve organization and mobilization of residents

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67 Brennan and Israel, "The Power of Community,” 95.

68 Miller and Rein. "Community Participation,” 84.
within a community. He explains further that understanding the nine domains of community empowerment improves participation; develops local leadership; increases problem assessment capacities, enhances the ability to ‘ask why’; builds empowering organizational structures; improves resource mobilization; strengthens links to other organizations and people; creates an equitable relationship with outside agents; and increases control over program management.\(^{69}\)

This approach will likely improve the community’s relationship with community development scholarship because it identifies specific issues for the practitioners to address and focuses on improving the community’s ownership and agency in the community development processes.

Communities are most powerful when they are in control of the community development process, when practitioners and experts work to establish equitable partnerships and facilitate community ownership.\(^{70}\) This concept is developed by Sherry R Arnstein, in “A Ladder to Citizen Participation,” and supported in the work of Zenia Kotval, in “The Link Between Community Development Practice and Theory: Intuitive or Irrelevant? A Case Study of New Britain, Connecticut,” Stephen A. Small, in “Action-Oriented Research: Strategies for Engaged Scholarship,” Susan Keefe, in her book *Participatory development in Appalachia: Cultural Identity, Community, and Sustainability*, and Kenneth E. Pegg, in “Three Faces of Empowerment: Expanding the Theory of Empowerment in Community Development.” These authors discuss the need for local leadership development as a means to empower communities in the community development process, and thereby mitigate the ‘disconnect.’ Kotval elaborates on this


\(^{70}\) Arnstein, "A ladder," 217.
point, writing, “[t]hus, community development requires more than creative strategies for economic stability and the creation of wealth. It is about creating social and cultural networks, about empowering people with knowledge and techniques and about creating better places to live and work.”

Smith makes a similar point, arguing that by giving heightened authority to community members the imbalance of authority and status can be addressed, thereby equalizing the power shared between community members and community development practitioners. Finally, Pegg clarifies this point by explaining, “empowerment comes through community leadership efforts. These efforts to empower people to take leadership roles within the community should be included in the overall community development process.” Through the development of local leadership communities can be engaged, educated, and cultivate an increased ownership in the development process.

4. Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing between community development experts and community members, and the translation of expert knowledge for use by community members, have been identified in the literature as playing a vital role in the quality and sustainability of community development projects. Several scholars discuss the important role knowledge plays in the community development process and the impact it can have on current and future community development efforts. For this reason, it is necessary to review the literature further to discover how best knowledge sharing and knowledge translation can

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71 Kotval, “The Link Between” 87.

72 Small, and Uttal, ”Action-Oriented Research,” 940.

be addressed and utilized to improve the sustainability of community development and diminish the ‘disconnect’.

The importance of valuing local knowledge is often identified in the literature as a fundamental solution for addressing the challenges to knowledge sharing in the community development process. Knowledge partnerships between practitioners, practicing scholars, and communities within the community development process are often uncommon, but have valuable potential for increasing the success and sustainability of community development projects.\(^7^4\) Susan Keefe, in *Participatory Development in Appalachia: Cultural Identity, Community, and Sustainability*, Jeffrey C. Bridger, Paloma Z. Frumento, Theodore R Alter, and Mark Z. Brennan, in “A Framework for Thinking and Acting Critically in Community,” David Mathews, in “What Kind of “Democracy Informs Community Development,” and Robyn Eversole, in *Knowledge Partnering for Community Development* and “Remaking Participation: Challenges for Community Development Practice” all agree that improvements to knowledge sharing are essential for successful community development. These authors argue that respect must be developed between communities and practitioners regarding all forms of knowledge.\(^7^5\) These authors also agree that this respect for knowledge and increased knowledge sharing begins with the community development professional; it is the responsibility of the practitioner to facilitate equitable knowledge sharing.\(^7^6\)

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\(^7^4\) Robyn Eversole, *Knowledge Partnering*, 102.

\(^7^5\) Mathews, “What Kind of Democracy,” 158.

\(^7^6\) Eversole, *Knowledge Partnering*, 102.
In *Knowledge Partnering for Community Development*, Eversole writes, “[d]evelopment professionals working with local communities need to critically consider how they understand knowledge and its role in development processes inside and outside the so called knowledge economy.” 77 In this same vein, Bridger, Frumento, Alter, and Brennan argue that

We need to move beyond the expert-driven model in which legitimate knowledge is portrayed as technical, instrumental, value-neutral, and divorced from particular time and places…Community development professionals must conceptualize the expert-citizen dichotomy and develop new patterns of communication that replace the unidirectional transfer of knowledge from expert to citizen. 78

The above literature stresses the need for the practitioner to facilitate improved knowledge sharing, recognize the value of the various forms of knowledge available in the community, and translate expert knowledge so it can be included in community development plans.

Jim Cavaye, in “Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas,” and Yasminah Beebeejaun and Catherine Durose, in ‘Beyond Text’: Exploring Ethos and Method in Co-producing Research with Communities,” take a similar stance, but argue that knowledge sharing can best be improved when assumptions surrounding knowledge, such as what types of knowledge are valuable to community development practice, are addressed by all involved in community development. Beebeejaun and Durose explain that the co-production of knowledge, which brings together experts and community members in partnership to produce community development research and development plans, has the

77 Ibid., 92.

ability to improve knowledge sharing and create a more equitable and sustainable community development process. They write, “[a]n understanding of co-production in research therefore has the following elements: a more equal partnership with communities and practitioners; working in a dynamic relationship to understand issues, create knowledge and then implement findings for transformational social change.”

Similarly Stephen A. Small, in “Action-Oriented Research: Strategies for Engaged Scholarship,” recognizes “the need for a broader and more inclusive definition of scholarship, one that includes the integration and application of knowledge, as well as values and rewards research, that has more direct application and relevance to citizens and communities.” If his advice is heeded, community development efforts might become more inclusive and encourage a greater exchange of knowledge and expertise.

Knowledge partnering, while rare, should become a more common practice in community development. Efforts should be made to ensure that knowledge partnering becomes the new norm for community development practitioners. While there are a number of ways to improve knowledge sharing between practitioners and communities, as well as the translation of scholarly knowledge into more usable forms, the literature on the topic agrees that improvements to knowledge sharing and translation begin with the practitioner. It is interesting that no discussion could be identified in the literature regarding the community’s reluctance to embrace expert knowledge; it may be useful to explore this question in future research.

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79 Beebeejaun et al., “Beyond Text,” 40.
80 Small and Uttal, "Action-Oriented Research," 938.
5. Healthy Democracy

The quality of a community’s democracy – the way its citizens work together to solve problems, make decisions, and the degree to which they participate in civics, plays a vital role in the success and sustainability of community development projects. The literature discusses several ways in which a healthy democracy influences the sustainability of community development projects, as well as how the quality of local democracies might be addressed to improve, not only the overall quality of life for community members, but community development outcomes as well.

A healthy democracy is one in which community members come together through civic engagement and participation to solve public problems. While community participation is at the heart of a healthy democracy, there are some essential aspects regarding the role of democracy in the community development process that exist outside of the theme of community participation. For example, John Gruidla & Ronald Hustedde, in “Towards a Robust Democracy: The Core Competencies Critical to Community Developers,” David Matthews, in “What Kind of Democracy Informs Community Development,” and Saul Alinsky in Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realist Radicals, all discuss the essential role a healthy democracy plays in the success of community development, in addition to the need for community development practitioners to foster a healthy democracy through equitable citizen participation and empowering community members.

Gruidla and Hustedde argue that, “[d]emocracy is closely related to community development in that each requires progress on community goals through a participatory

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process that engages citizens and associations.” This is similar to Matthews, who argues that bringing community members together to solve problems is at the heart of democracy. He writes, “[w]e see democracy as a political system where citizens generate the power to rile themselves by joining forces to solve common problems.”

Gruidla and Hustedde further explain that in order to foster democracy, “…community developers, as well as community psychologists, work effectively in ethnically diverse communities and be mindful and skillful in engaging marginalized residents.”

Similarly, S.M. Miller and Martin Rein, in “Community Participation: Past and Future,” discuss the apathy and vicious cycle of poverty that is often found in poor communities. They suggest that if these challenges are to be combated locally, democracy must be expanded. “To break this cycle, the vigor of local democracy must be restored and this can best be accomplished by expanding the freedom and the competences of local residents to respond to their local problems.”

This suggests that for community development to function effectively, and for improved connections between scholarship and practice, democracy be recognized as a valuable community development factor that should be more heavily invested in.

Alinsky takes the discussion of democracy a step further, warning that people must be willing to make sacrifices if they are to truly be free and live democratically. He writes,

> [f]rom the beginning the weakness, as well as the strength, of the democratic ideal has been the people. People cannot be free unless they are willing to sacrifice

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83 Gruidl, and Hustedde, "Towards a Robust Democracy,” 280.
86 Miller and Rein, "Community Participation,” 85.
some of their interests to guarantee the freedom of others. The price of democracy
is the ongoing pursuit of the common good by all of the people. Citizen
participation is the animated spirit and force in a society predicated on
volunteerism.  

The challenge, though, remains of just how to engage community members effectively
and foster a healthy democracy.

Many scholars argue that social capital is an essential component of community
development, and that by utilizing the social capital of the community a healthy
democracy is promoted and engaged throughout the community development process.
Social capital can be understood as the social networks based on reciprocity that are
found within a community.  

Robert Putnam, in his book Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, popularized social capital theory which has now
come to be understood by many community development experts as an essential
component of a healthy democracy and sustainable community development efforts. For
example, Susan E. Keefe, in Participatory Development in Appalachia, Malinda Bollar
Wagner, in “Playing the Power Game: The Limits of Participatory Development,” and
Helena Matthews Lewis, in “Rebuilding Communities a Twelve-Step Recovery Plan” all
address the need to identify and invest in the social capital of a community in order to
promote healthy democracy and successful community development. Putnam initially
described two forms of social capital networks that are essential for communities to
function effectively, ‘bridging’ social capital and ‘bonding’ social capital. He writes that
on the one hand, “[b]onding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity

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87 Saul Alinsky, “Rules for Radicals” The Community Development Reader: History, Themes and
Issues, ed. Gary Craig, Marjorie Mayo, Keith Popple, Mae Shaw, and Marilyn Taylor (Bristol: Policy

88 Robert D Putnam, Bowling alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New
and mobilizing solidarity.” On the other hand, he notes that ‘bridging’ social capital can be understood as bridging networks, connecting external networks and developing information diffusion. Similarly, Keefe argues that investing in the social capital of a community, the assets found within it, and encouraging equitable community participation will provide a greater chance for a healthy democracy to flourish.

Democracy is predicated on empowerment, sacrifice, participation, liberty and action. While many of these ideas are discussed throughout this review it is, nonetheless, important to single out healthy democracy, measured largely by the level of civic engagement and participation within a community, as a fundamental aspect of community development. The literature stresses the importance of a healthy democracy in fostering sustainable community development, but also points to the practitioner as the primary actor responsible for engaging community members in the process.

6. The Practitioner

The role of the practitioner is essential to successful community development efforts, and much of the literature holds the practitioner responsible for making improvements to community development practice. For each of the factors discussed in this review, the responsibility falls primarily on community development practitioners to address the challenges associated with each and to facilitate improvements in their practice and in the community development process. While the literature reviewed does

89 Ibid., 23.


91 Keefe, Participatory Development, 11.

point to the need for improved community participation and empowerment in the community development process, it does not hold the community responsible for making improvements to community development practice. Rather, the responsibility for improving community development and thus, addressing the ‘disconnect,’ falls on the community development expert and practitioner. In addition to the practitioner’s connection with each of the various factors, there are issues related specifically to the role of the practitioner and the practice of community development that should be explored in order to assess how the ‘disconnect’ might be improved.

David Matarrita-Cascantea and Mark A. Brennan, in “Conceptualizing Community Development in the Twenty-First Century,” Mark A. Brennan and Glenn D Israel, in “The Power of Community, Guy Bessette’s in Involving the Community: A Guide to Participatory Development Communication, and Jim Cavaye, in “Rural Community Development – New Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas” agree that the practitioner must address the historical vertical approach to community development, which failed to equitably include community members in the development process. They must also better engage the community in self-help community development strategies. Such efforts are expected to address participation challenges and better empower the community to take ownership in the community development process. When community development practitioners facilitate self-help forms of community development and develop more capable local leadership, the community might be more open to new ideas and expert insight.93

Matarrita-Cascantea and Brennan argue that “[s]elf-help forms of community

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93 Miller and Rein, “Community Participation,” 84.
development provide residents with opportunities to develop capacities resulting in self-reliance and greater control over change in the community. These efforts can lead to innovation, sustainable outcomes, and the formation of feelings of attachment and ownership, while also building “community.” Similarly, Bessette suggests that if community development researchers and practitioners are to move away from the vertical approach, they must work as facilitators rather than experts. He suggests that the practitioner working as an expert reflects the old model of community development where they are aided by the community, but the new approach should be one in which the practitioner works as the facilitator of a process that involves the community and stakeholders as equals. Being able to act as a facilitator is the challenge because typically practitioners are inclined to take on the role of the expert. 

Improved knowledge sharing and an increased valuing of community knowledge may help combat the practitioner’s inclination to take on the role of expert by bringing the community and practitioner together to share ideas, create a vision, and develop a strategic plan that addresses the needs of the community. This will result in a more empowered community able to share equitably in the community development process. Robyn Eversole, in “Remaking participation: challenges for community development practice,” and in her book, Knowledge Sharing for Community Development, also suggests that practitioners need to improve the way they view knowledge in the community development process. She writes, “[c]itizens, communities, and small organizations are typically characterized as having energy, legs on the ground, and

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94 Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan "Conceptualizing Community Development," 301.
95 Bessette, Involving the Community, 10.
opinions … but they are seldom characterized as having knowledge. ‘Knowledge’ as such is still broadly understood to come from experts…”

The literature also suggests a need for improved competencies for community development practitioners to ensure not only a more equitable and sustainable community development process, but also to create standards for the practitioner that will mitigate the ‘disconnect’ and better engage the community. John Gruidla and Ronald Hustedde, in “Towards a Robust Democracy: The Core Competencies Critical to Community Developers,” Lucius Botes and Dingie van Rensburg in “Community Participation in Development: Nine plagues and twelve commandments,” Robyn Eversole, in Knowledge Partnering For Community Development, and Ronald J. Hustedde and Jacek Ganowicz, in “The Basics: What’s Essential About Theory for Community Development” all highlight the need for improved competencies and guidelines to improve the practice of community development. Clear competencies are likely to improve community development outcomes and may even improve the practitioners’ utilization of scholarship. In “Towards a Robust Democracy: The Core Competencies Critical to Community Developers,” John Gruidla and Ronald Hustedde recommend several competencies that should be established in order to improve the role of the practitioners in the practice of community development. They suggest that practitioners need to develop values and competencies that are put into practice throughout their work with communities. Moreover, practitioners should make efforts to learn from past mistakes rather than focusing discussions solely on positive outcomes.97

96 Eversole, “Remaking Participation,” 32.

97 Botes and van Rensburg, "Community Participation in Development,” 43.
A more defined role and better clarified and well communicated competencies for community development practitioners may help to mitigate what Hustedde and Ganowicz identify as a fragmentation in the field of community development resulting from the immense amount of research performed across academic boundaries.98 Throughout the literature, responsibility has largely been placed on the practitioner to address false assumptions regarding the role of the community in the development process, more equitably engage and empower communities, establish productive knowledge sharing, clarify what it means to practice community development, and address the consequences of the vertical approach to community development. Is it possible that these factors might begin to improve if more concentrated efforts were made to improve the guidelines and competencies of the community development practitioner?

Conclusion

Identifying solutions to the challenges faced in more clearly conceptualizing community development, improving community participation, advancing community empowerment, enhancing knowledge sharing, fostering healthier local democracies, and refining the role of the practitioner in the community development process is required in order to improve the relationship between communities, community development practitioners, and scholarship. This second literature review has provided insights into a number of potential ways that the ‘disconnect’ between the availability of community development scholarship and its application in community development practice and community decision-making might be mitigated or overcome. However, the recommendations suggested in this review are not definitive and should be explored further for a more comprehensive understanding of how to address best the ‘disconnect’

between academic scholarship and community development efforts. Throughout the literature, community development scholars hold practitioners largely responsible for addressing the six factors identified in the literature. While these factors are likely also a function of challenges found within the community itself, the literature does not discuss the community as being responsible for initiating changes to overcome the ‘disconnect.’

**Structured Interviews**

The two literature reviews discussed six factors as contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between community development scholarship and the application of that scholarship in community development practice and community decision-making. The structured interviews with community development scholars were conducted following the literature reviews in order to better understand each of these factors, as well as possible means for overcoming the ‘disconnect’ and fostering more sustainable community development outcomes.

Interview data was collected via a six-part questionnaire administered during a phone call with each of the five subjects. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to conducting the interviews, which were recorded through hand-written notes and the use of a digital audio recording device. Each interview subject was asked the following six questions in the same order.

1. How do you go about applying scholarship on community development to your own work with communities?

2. If there are obstacles to applying research findings to practice, what would you say that they are?

3. Based on what you have shared with me so far, which are the greatest of these obstacles?
4. When you encounter these obstacles, how do you deal with them? *Can* they all be dealt with? Which are the ones that can be addressed?

5. In your expert opinion, do the issues that you have identified as contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between the *availability* of and *application* of community development scholarship tend to be location-specific, or are they encountered in community development work more broadly?

6. Finally, if you were asked to provide guidance to other community development experts about ways to more effectively apply research findings in their work with communities, what would be your top 2-3 recommendations?

Subject responses to the interview questions were analyzed as follows:

1. The hand-written notes and digital audio recordings were first analyzed independently for each interview in order to identify any similarities between the subject’s responses and the factors identified in the literature reviews.

2. Notes and recordings were analyzed on a question-by-question basis across the set of interviews in order to identify common themes (i.e., consensus) among interviewees’ responses to each question. Differences in responses were also identified and noted.

3. Connections were made between subjects’ responses to each question and the factors identified in the literature reviews as contributing to the ‘disconnect’ in order to identify similarities between them, as well as to identify any additional factors discussed by the interview subjects.

**Question #1**

Each interview subject was asked how he or she approaches applying community development scholarship in his or her own work with communities. Overall, the subjects agreed that their work begins with reviewing available scholarship and then applying that scholarship in local community development work. Moreover, they all noted the role that service plays in the academy and how this allows them to work on projects with local communities, giving them opportunities to apply scholarship to practice and educate communities and practitioners about community development scholarship and strategies.
Also in response to this question, two of the subjects discussed the importance of working in partnership with communities throughout the community development process in order to train leaders and empower the community. Moreover, one interviewee discussed the value of getting scholarship into the hands of community leaders and practitioners in a language that they can understand (this idea came up repeatedly in response to different interview questions).

The answers provided in response to Question #1 point to the discussion in the literature regarding knowledge sharing and community participation, as well as the role of the practitioner. The interviewees described the need for improved knowledge sharing between community development experts and community members and for the translation of that knowledge into more readily usable forms. Finally, interview subjects identified the need for enhanced partnerships between community development experts and community members and improvements to the role the practitioner plays throughout the community development process.

**Question #2**

Interviewees were then asked to identify obstacles to applying research findings to community development practice. Several subjects noted that communities and community leaders often do not believe that community development scholarship and theory are relevant to their work. Interviewees also identified time as a key obstacle: the academy and the community operate on very different timelines, which often interferes with the work done in, and with, communities. Academics often take more time than communities have or are willing to set aside for development efforts, and the nine month academic calendar does not align with the year-round schedule of a community.
Additionally, the timeline of a community can be an obstacle because communities may not have the means, or want to spend all of the time it might take, to carry out community development efforts.

The majority of interviewees also identified some of the aspects related to the production and accessibility of scholarship as common obstacles in their community development work. Examples included research methodologies that are not always well-suited to the needs of the community, such as “trendy” research approaches designed to ensure publication rather than serve the needs of communities, research questions that do not focus on the needs of communities, and the over-reliance on quantitative data. Moreover, several subjects stressed the importance of making research more accessible to both community members and practitioners; they argued for a need to move away from the growing popularity of strictly quantitative research in order to produce research more closely grounded in real world practice. Most of the interviewees expressed a concern about the over-dependence on quantitative data in community development research. They suggested that quantitative data on its own is largely irrelevant to communities and lacks the experiential element typically found in qualitative research and case studies. They further argued that the most useful data for communities and practitioners in the community development process is not quantitative, especially for small communities where quantitative data is often not readily or reliably available or applicable. Future research should specifically examine the relative roles of quantitative and qualitative research in community development.

Further, several of the subjects pointed out that academics, because they overwhelmingly write journal articles for publication, often do not translate their work to
be clearly understood by communities or practitioners. That is, academics usually do not make the efforts to translate the technical writing and jargon often found in academic publications into everyday language. As a result, there is often a gap between the academic world and the real world and, consequently, a need for improved communication channels for distributing useful scholarship to communities and practitioners. The subjects also identified funding as an obstacle in their work, as scholars often lack the funding needed to work on long-term community development projects with communities, and communities themselves often lack the needed funding to pay practitioners for long-term services.

The subjects’ responses to Question #2 corresponded to several of the factors discussed in the literature reviews. Specifically, subjects discussed the need for improved knowledge sharing and translation, as well as a clearer conceptualization of community development theory in order to assist communities and practitioners in community development efforts. They also discussed the need for improvements in the role the community development practitioner plays in community development efforts, including utilizing and translating scholarship in ways useful for the communities they serve, and for improved leadership training throughout the community development process. Finally, the interviewees pointed to the responsibility of scholars to modify the research methodologies they typically apply in their community development research and work in communities; this issue should be explored in future research, as this points to a new potential factor contributing to the ‘disconnect.’
Question #3

In this question the interviewees were asked, of all of the obstacles they identified previously, which they found to be the greatest challenge when it comes to applying research findings to practice. Overall, the majority of interviewees identified time and money as the primary obstacles to applying academic research to community development practice. Many interviewees also identified resistance to change and the lack of capacity at the community level, as well as the need for improved skills, knowledge, and leadership training among community stakeholders. Along these same lines, interviewees shared that communities and community development practitioners regularly find that academic research is not applicable to real world community development practice. It should also be noted that the discussion surrounding quantitative data was brought up again in response to this question, with many interviewees again pointing to scholar’s over-dependence on quantitative data versus case studies and qualitative data as an additional obstacle.

In the discussion of time and money as obstacles, both within the community and the academy, it was noted that communities frequently lack the needed funds to pay for the services of community development practitioners or to fund the projects they envision for their communities. Additionally, practitioners working with communities on development efforts frequently lack the time and resources to review the literature and apply it to their work in communities.

The answers to this question points to the discussion in the literature reviews regarding knowledge sharing and translation, improvements in the role of the community development practitioner, community empowerment, and community participation. The
quality of a community’s democracy was also identified in the subjects’ responses to this question.

**Question #4**

Interviewees were asked in Question #4 to identify how they deal with the obstacles they identified in Question #3, if they can be dealt with, and which of them can be addressed realistically. The interviewees unanimously agreed that all of the obstacles they identified in Question #3 could be addressed, and that it is only a matter of having sufficient time and money to do so. Many interviewees did add, however, that while it is possible for these obstacles to be addressed, it is unlikely that this will occur because of the amount of time and money required to do so.

Improving practitioner and community access to community development scholarship, enhancing leadership training, and improving knowledge sharing were all identified by the interviewees as ways to address the obstacles discussed in Question #3. They also pointed out that obstacles related to the community development practitioner could be overcome. This would, however, require practitioners to have the time and resources to consult the literature regularly and then synthesize and distill that information for the benefit of the communities they serve.

Additionally, a number of interviewees identified the need for the academy to take responsibility for its role in contributing to the obstacles (those related to research methodologies and the translation of academic scholarship into colloquial language). The suggestion was also made by several interviewees that the that community development scholars need to make more efforts to ensure that community development research includes field data collection and is grounded in the reality of communities. Several of
the interviewees suggested that this will be possible when scholarship moves away from its over-dependence on quantitative data and includes more case studies and qualitative information. Subjects also suggested that scholars look beyond their primary goal of journal publications and impact scores in order to focus more on how their research is actually impacting communities. Further, several interviewees argued for an improved understanding amongst scholars and practitioners of political theory and the significant role that politics plays in community development. An improved understanding of politics will help the community development expert more effectively bring together two or more political parties within a community in order to achieve community development goals.

These answers correspond to a number of factors mentioned in the literature such as the health of a community’s democracy, the role of practitioners, knowledge sharing, and the conceptualization of community development theory. Again, the issues of time and money, as well as the responsibility of the academic community to refine their research methodologies and improve the use of case studies and qualitative data, should be examined further to enhance the understanding of the ‘disconnect.’

**Question #5**

In this question, interviewees were asked to identify whether the obstacles they discussed in previous questions tend to be location specific or if they are encountered in community development more broadly. It was agreed unanimously that the obstacles identified were encountered broadly in community development efforts. Nevertheless, interviewees agreed that geography matters and that no two communities are the same; as a result, each will has its own unique set of issues.
Question #6

In the final question the interviewees were asked to provide two to three recommendations for community development experts regarding ways to more effectively apply research findings in their work with communities. Overall, the interviewees recommended spending more time in the field in order to gain real world experience. Several interviewees also agreed that much of the literature currently being produced does not adequately represent communities because it relies too heavily on quantitative data; they argued for the development of scholarship that is more applicable to the real world. Scholars need to consider and write for communities attempting community development efforts and scholars and practitioners should communicate their results in ways that communities can understand. The interview subjects also recommended that community development experts treat the community as an expert and work in partnership with the community. They recommended further that practitioners and scholars work to educate and train communities and prepare community leaders through skills and leadership training so they might more effectively continue the work of community development long after the experts have gone. This includes putting applicable scholarship in the hands of community leaders by providing executive summaries and training materials. Finally, recommendations were made regarding the vital role of politics in community development. Subjects recommended that practitioners and scholars improve their understanding of politics, political theory, and the political implications of community development decisions in their work.

In sum, all of the ‘factors’ identified in the literature as strongly contributing to the ‘disconnect’ between available scholarship and its use in community development
practice are cited in the answers provided by the interviewees. They noted that the role of the practitioner should be developed to incorporate scholarship better and to improve the translation of scholarship into colloquial language. Knowledge sharing and translation were also discussed in terms of improving the access to available scholarship and the distribution of that scholarship in ways that are useful for practitioners and community members. Moreover, the factors of community participation and empowerment were identified both in the literature and in the interviews. Overall, the interview results agreed with the literature about which factors strongly contribute to the ‘disconnect,’ but they also point to the need for further examination of the role of community development scholars and their influence on the ‘disconnect’ between available scholarship and practice in community development.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This thesis set out to identify the potential reasons for, and solutions to, the ‘disconnect’ between the available scholarship and its application to real world community development practice. The first literature review identified six factors contributing to the ‘disconnect,’ which included the need for: clearer conceptualization of community development theory and jargon; expanded community participation in the community development process; more equitable community empowerment throughout the community development process; improved knowledge sharing and translation of both scholarly and local knowledge; enhanced health of community democracy; improved competencies and training for the community development practitioner. After identifying these six factors, a second literature review was conducted in order to gain
further understanding of these factors and to identify potential solutions to the ‘disconnect’.

The second literature review focused on the potential ways to mitigate, or potentially eliminate, the ‘disconnect’ by addressing and identifying potential solutions to the six factors:

1. Conceptualization of community development- the literature reviewed agreed that improving the clarity of community development theory and jargon is necessary to address the ‘disconnect;’ however, there was little consensus as to how best to do this.

2. Community participation- while there were a variety of recommendations made regarding improving community participation, the majority of the literature reviewed suggested that improvements to participation should begin by addressing community development experts’ false assumptions about community participation in community development and better operationalizing community participation in the practice of community development.

3. Community empowerment- the literature largely agreed that improvements to community empowerment can be made through an enhanced understanding of power in relation to community development. There were a number of additional recommendations which, overall, lack consensus and practical application.

4. Knowledge sharing- there was overall agreement in the literature that practitioners should facilitate improved knowledge sharing partnerships with communities and better recognize the value of the various forms of knowledge available in the community, as well as take more responsibility for translating expert knowledge so it can be included more readily in community development work.

5. Healthy democracy- the literature recommended a range of ideas for improving community democracy, including investing in social capital, developing local leadership, and engaging citizens equitably in the development process. However, there was little identifiable consensus regarding how best to foster healthier democracies.

6. The practitioner- the literature unanimously agreed that the role of the practitioner should be improved in a number of ways. The primary suggestions were to address false assumptions regarding the role of the community in the development process, equitably engage and empower
communities, establish productive knowledge sharing, clarify what it means to practice community development, and address the consequences of the vertical approach to community development.

While the reviewed literature showed broad consensus about the existence of these issues, there was little consensus as to how these factors should be addressed in relation to the ‘disconnect.’ Additional research should examine more closely how practitioners have successfully and unsuccessfully addressed these six factors in their community development practice. Moreover, while there was a great deal of agreement as to the importance of addressing the ‘disconnect’ and the six factors contributing to it, it was unclear as to why these problems have not been communicated more clearly to communities and practitioners, or why more widespread discussion is not taking place amongst scholars, practitioners, and communities about how to address these factors and improve community development efforts. The recommendations for addressing the six factors were largely theoretical and failed to include pragmatic recommendations and, consequently, fail to address meaningfully the ‘disconnect’ between available scholarship and community development practice.

The interview component of this thesis research was intended to provide real world insights into the ‘disconnect’ and its impact on community development practice and sustainable community development outcomes. The structured interviews with five university faculty members provided further insight into the ‘disconnect’ and largely supported the six factors identified in both the first and second literature reviews. However, the interviews also suggested additional potential factors to be considered that were absent from the literature. Specifically, three additional factors were identified, including: the need for improved understanding of political theory and politics in
In both literature reviews, community development scholars held practitioners responsible for addressing the ‘disconnect.’ In contrast, the interviewed scholar-practitioners held community development scholars responsible for improving the disconnect by refining their methodological approaches, developing their understanding of political theory and community politics, and improving the way they communicate with the communities in which they conduct research. The fact that the interviews produced additional factors that were not identified in the literature is further evidence for the existence of the ‘disconnect’ and the need for further examination and research on this topic.

In closing, future research in this area should include a further examination of the six identified factors and the real-world effects of the potential solutions identified in the second literature review. Moreover, further examination of the additional factors identified in the structured interviews should also be explored in future. Finally, future research should incorporate additional interviews with community development scholars, community development practitioners, and community members in order to compare and contrast each groups’ experience with the ‘disconnect’ and their recommendations as to how best to mitigate it and improve the gap between available scholarship and its application in real world community development.
Bibliography


