

## The Ethics of Navigating Complex Communities The CRP Brown Bag Series

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*In CRP's "brown bag" series last winter, Claudia Isaac talked about ethics in planning from on her broad experience in community engagement, education and training, and her work for the City of Albuquerque and other organizations. Her professional practice includes work on workforce housing, historic preservation, community health, domestic violence prevention, and community food and farming.*

I am really fascinated and intrigued by your studio-based, client-based studio approach to teaching and learning and I also get the strong sense that you are grappling with some similar community-engaged scholarship questions that I have been engaging in my own work. So I am hoping to learn from you as I share with you community-engaged work and experiences at the University of New Mexico.

I would like to start with a brief comment about my approach to community-based planning process: I work primarily with community-based organizations, community-driven service agencies and, to some extent, municipal and state agencies, all of whom are interested in building the capacity of their communities, so that they are less reliant on outside experts and more able to make their own decisions.

I am particularly interested in what are being called "hybrid communities" or "cosmopolitan communities,"<sup>1</sup> that is, communities that have experienced migrations of people over time to create very diverse and sometimes very complicated communities.

Albuquerque is in a very poor state—we rank at the bottom of just about every indicator in terms of income, social determinants of health, and education. The thing that links many people in New Mexico is the experience of poverty. Beyond that, there is an enormous amount of diversity in the City of Albuquerque and in the rural and urban places in New Mexico, which, though a cultural and social strength, often leads to contention, and sometimes makes it very difficult for communities to find a common ground and a way to move forward collectively.

Note: FOCUS thanks Claudia Isaac for the permission to publish her talk. The editing of the original transcription was by Kayla Gordon, graduate student CRP, and revised by Claudia Isaac.

<sup>1</sup> Concepts developed by Young (2002), Sandercock (1998) and Rocco (2002).



So my work engages that diversity and contention, and tries to help communities figure out who their allies are, where they are in contention, where they simply are not on the same page, and help them strategize around that.

I use two primary methodologies in my practice. The first is participatory evaluation (empowerment evaluation)<sup>2</sup>, which is an evaluation tool, but I find it a tool that is extremely useful working from problem identification through implementation, and in turn through evaluation. In

empowerment evaluation, participants and beneficiaries are the primary actors. Funders, policy makers, government are not unimportant actors, but they are not the primary focus. The purpose of empowerment evaluation is to facilitate a reflective culture among staff, community members, and other participants so that they are actively involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating their own planning activities.

Empowerment evaluation uses the evaluator's, or the planner's, outsider perspective to convene participants, collect information, and analyze information from stakeholders in a confidential way, which allows them to say things that they may not be comfortable saying in a group setting. My job is then to compile that information in a way that rigorously reflects back to the larger group—without breaching confidentiality—the issues, concerns and solutions that have been generated.

These solutions are then open for review, reflection, and reconsideration without becoming divisive, (something that often happens in diverse communities where people are fighting with each other and find it difficult to find a point of common ground). As an outsider, I can come in and say "All right, I am going to talk to you, just to you, please be frank, I promise that I will not breach your confidentiality," and then I pull it together in a way that tells a complicated story, without

<sup>2</sup> Fetterman (1996) and Kemmis, Stephen and McTaggart (2005).

identifying individuals.

The other body of theory that I use to guide my work is called “reflective practice in theory of action.” This comes from Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, another “oldie but goodie” from 1975. They taught about double loop learning, that is: we have a theory, we know what it is, and we thought about it before we go into a community—we know what our approach is. We then use that to guide our planning actions, and we reflect on those actions and outcomes to refine our theory. So it is a constant loop where we are constantly going back and forth between, “this is how I think things are,” “this is what I saw when I was actually doing the practice guided by what how I think things are,” and “now I am going to go back and rethink my theory.” It keeps us from getting into habits of practice that may not be productive or socially just; it keeps us from relying on “this is just the way we have always done things”. This allows us to engage in a reflective process: double loop learning. It also helps us bring our espoused theory together with the theory we’re actually using.

This reflective practice is also particularly useful when engaging with community participants. If one can reshape the planning process so it is more of a dialogue than a deliberation, then everybody is learning from everyone else, and although they may not end up agreeing with each other, everybody at least understands that they are talking about the same terms. So community engagement is inherently reflective practice.

That is the basis of my overall practice. Now I would like to discuss how we understand the complexities and identities that are in existence in the communities that we work in. This is not a new conversation: Sherri Arnstein wrote about it in the 1960s in “The Ladder of Citizen Participation”, but what is new is that I think planning practitioners and theorists have gotten much more sophisticated in understanding how complicated communities are. In one of Leonie Sandercock’s books on cosmopolitan cities she writes about the core story.<sup>3</sup> Think about a map: if a map had every piece of information about a place on it, it would be a completely useless map. We make decisions about what is important to put on the map, and what we can leave off. That implies a distinct point of view on the part of the map maker, map-making is taking a position.

Think about when you go to talk with the communities that you are working with in your studios: they tell you a core story about what their community is about. If they told you absolutely everything about their community, you would still be there right now. It would take forever, but you really wouldn’t have a very clear understanding of the priorities and values of that community. Rather, the community members you talk to have distilled what they consider the core story: the most important information that should go on their conceptual map. That distillation of information is great, because it means

that the community has come together and figures out who they are; however, it means that some ideas, interests, even residents, or participants get left out.

As an example, the work that I have done in the Sawmill/ Wells Park community in Albuquerque, an old industrial community, where a lot of homeless services are located. For a very long time, the neighborhood association that I was working with was adamant that homeless people were not members of the community. Well, if you assess the demographics, they are actually about a third of the population of that neighborhood. The neighborhood association core story explicitly excluded homeless people, and it has taken almost a decade now to finally have a conversation about welcoming supportive services for that population. This is an ongoing conversation, and it is taking a very long time to rewrite the core story in a way that is more inclusive, and that is more respectful of all the different kinds of people in the community.

So I treat all of this as an ethical question, and I think we do have obligations to communities as planners. The first obligation is to know who we are (and that is not as easy as it sounds because we all have very complicated identities ourselves). The second is to learn the tools for understanding community complexity. We have aggregated data, we have Census data—there are all kinds of sources of data out there. There is, however, also community data which is critical to our full understanding and analysis. Learning how to work with communities to mine what they know about their communities is a whole set of tools that I work with quite often.

The third obligation is to be reflective on how our own identity intersects with the complex identities we encounter in practice. When I walk in to an African American community, there is a different relationship that I have there, than when I walk into a white community. It is not better or worse, but it is different. Understanding who we are in relation to the communities we work in can help us build that better communication, which in turn allows us to get our work done in a more inclusive and just way.

We need to develop tools to help us navigate that complexity towards positive outcomes, since this work is often contentious and interests are often in contradiction with each other. Sometimes those contradictions cannot be bridged, and sometimes you have to say, as in the Sawmill/ Wells Park Neighborhood case, “Well, as a planner I am taking a stance, and I think that homeless people are getting the short end of the stick in this community.” I cannot just say, “Well, it is the community’s will to try and expel homeless people.” That would not be consistent with my own personal ethics, and I have to find a way to communicate with the community that I respect them, that I like them, and that I respect what they are doing, but I really have a critique of the way in which they are addressing homelessness.

I think it is helpful to step back a little bit and ask, how do we know about communities? Most of us as planners and as

<sup>3</sup> Sandercock, 1998.

academics have been trained in Cartesian rationality. Named after Rene Descartes, it is the idea that knowledge is based on logical deduction. It is characterized by strict rules of evidence and avoidance of distortion caused by emotion, or a researcher's relationship with subjects. The epistemology is based on the idea that the more distanced we are from the data, the better our data and analysis. This is a great approach to generating knowledge, but I disagree with those who accept Cartesian rationality as the only route towards reliable knowledge. There are other kinds of rationalities; those are called "standpoint rationality." There is a difference between this and Cartesian rationality where we get as distant from our data as possible. In standpoint rationality our first person lens on reality helps us understand truths invisible to others. There is no single truth; there are a number of truths depending on our experience.<sup>4</sup>

Standpoint rationality is referred to as "local knowledge" by Clifford Geertz; it is called "experiential knowledge" by the famous pragmatist philosopher John Dewey: expertise as experience-based.<sup>5</sup> For those of us trained as planners in Cartesian rationality it is often really difficult to embrace local knowledge as real, and to take that knowledge and experience as just as rigorous, as thoughtful and analytical, as that generated by our Cartesian rationality. But in the end the key in doing effective and ethical community based practice is to bring the technical and methodological skills that we have to the community, but also learn from the community and their experiential knowledge. You may then bring those together into a much richer and more nuanced understanding of now not a core story, but a much more nuanced and overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, community story.

The next concept that I want to talk about is called multiplex identity, which is really just anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's snappy way of making a new word out of the terms "complex" and "multiple."<sup>6</sup> The idea is that we all have multiple and complex identities. I am a woman, I am an African American, I am a scholar, I am a professor, I am a teacher, I am a Quaker, I am an activist—all of those are absolutely important aspects of my identity. I want to ask each of you to think about all of the things that define you, and describe you. When we say "this is who I am," it is all of those things together. I am old, I have arthritis: all of these things are part of my identity, and they shape the way that I see the world.

The same is true in the communities in which I work. This idea that all of these things shape our experiences also means that they shape what we consider a good outcome. If we understand these complex and multiplex identity, then we can understand where somebody who seems to be coming from left field with an idea about what their community should be about is

coming from, what experiences and identities are shaping their position. The idea of multiple identities helps us understand that no one is just one thing. I have recently been working with New Mexico Main Street. As you may know, the National Main Street program does downtown redevelopment in small and rural communities, and at least in New Mexico, those are mostly small and rural communities. Those communities are incredibly complicated, although they may have a population of only 500. There may be industrial ranchers, small scale ranchers, garden farmers, industrial farmers, small business people, Wal-Mart's, elected officials who may have been in a political family for generations, and new people moving in to run for office—these are incredibly complex places. That multiplex identity of the community makes it very hard to write a core story about them. And most important, this idea that there is always going to be "multiplexity," means that there is always going to be some form of conflict.

Early on in my practice I had to get over my discomfort with conflict, because if I didn't, I would not be able to do my work. I personally hate conflict, but it exists, and understanding it helps to do what Manuel Castells calls the "choreography of conflict,"<sup>7</sup> which is helping people to acknowledge and respect their differences and decide where they are not going to agree with one another. At least then we are honest about the fact that we are fighting with each other, which ironically means that we can also discover realistic points of common ground that may not encompass the entire community. This means that you have to come up with a planning outcome that is much more specific and narrow, because you do not have that sense of common purpose amongst the entire group.

This is called mapping "subject position" and "social location." Subject position is another anthropological term, and it refers to all of the different aspects of our identities as a collective. We have a multiplex identity as an individual that then communicates with each other surfaces certain aspects of our subject positions over others in our communication. For instance, when I go to a Quaker meeting where there are mostly Quakers, the other aspects of our identity are not really all that relevant to our sense of community; what binds us together is our "Quakerness."

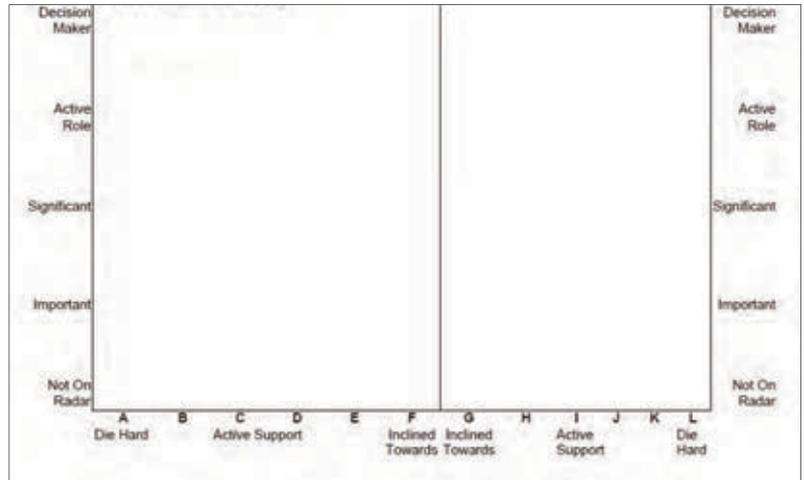
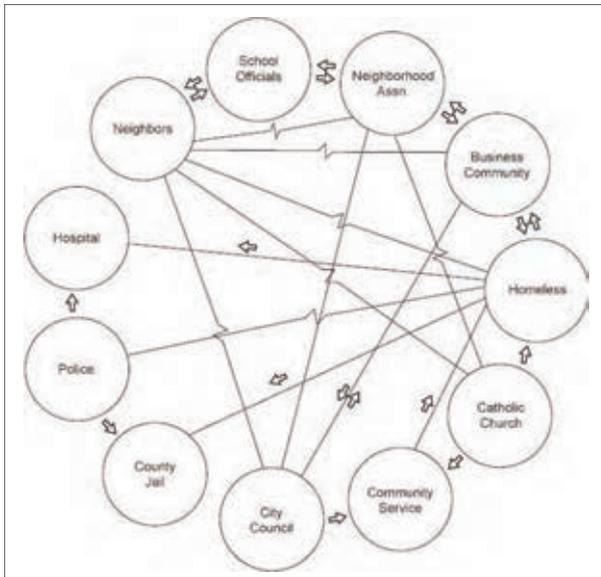
When I go to the South Valley in Bernalillo County, in the metropolitan area of Albuquerque, and talk to farmers, it is really important to them that they are not only small scale farmers, but they are Hispano and Native Americans farmers who are maintaining their tradition which goes back centuries—that is the heart of their identity. It is not just that they are farmers, it is not just that they want to make a living from farming, which they do. The key point is that they want to preserve that sense of identity that draws them together of being traditional, Hispano, and Native American farmers who have a very specific relationship to their farming enterprise. It

<sup>4</sup> Heikes, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz (2000) and Friedman (1996)

<sup>6</sup> Rosaldo, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Susser, 2001.



Example of a Sociogram (left) and of a Power Analysis Chart (above).

is different from, for instance, industrial farms. So for this issue, in this moment, this is the part of their identities that rises to the forefront.

Sometimes experts come in and try to share new techniques with these farmers. This prioritized share identity allows them to say “that is very nice, but we do not just choose our techniques because they are efficient and will make us more money, we choose them because they preserve an historical tradition that is really important to us.”

So what are some of the tools that we have to map community identity? One tool is a sociogram<sup>8</sup>, which is basically looking at the individuals and institutions (formal and informal) in a community and figuring out the relationships between them. Who talks to whom? Who learns from whom? Who relies on whom for influence when you have got to go to the city council or county commissioner? How are these institutions in alignment, and where are they separate? Now remember, it is a multiplex identity, a complicated community, and so how that plays out is going to be really different in every community.

Another way of mapping community identities is through power analysis.<sup>9</sup> In power analysis, you ask on a given an issue, who has what kind of power? That is the vertical axis. Who is a decision maker? Who has an active role? Who is significant, but not necessarily a decision maker? Who is not on the radar? Then you ask if people are neutral on the issue, if there is “die hard” support, or “die hard” opposition, or if there two are positions that are “die hard” on either side.

It is a really interesting, often fun, and very illuminating community exercise. You break people down into groups and you

ask: “Who are the actors on this issue?” Participants then write things down on sticky notes or cards, you cluster them up on the wall and say: “We have a cluster that includes mostly municipal officials.” Then you ask “Where are they on this power analysis chart?” Municipal officials are decision makers. They may in fact say that they really hate the idea of downtown redevelopment, and want to put a Wal-Mart up by the freeway at the edge of town. So they constitute die-hard opposition and represent power as a decision maker. This is a problem if you want to promote downtown redevelopment. Then you ask if there is there anybody on the other side? Well, yes, there is the National Main Street which has decision making power, strong connections to the State Legislature, and is strongly in support of downtown redevelopment. The point of this exercise is to figure out where there is potential to move opposition to a community initiative toward support (to the right on the x axis), and/ or to reduce the power and influence of community actors in opposition to a community initiative (down on the y axis).

Note that this requires planners and community members to make a decision about where they stand. Community based practice is not just about finding the lowest common denominator and ending there. It is about determining what community members (as complicated as they are) think is the right thing to do, being ready to persuade and argue for that position, and then seeing who is in the middle and can be persuaded in one direction or another.

If somebody is in die-hard opposition and the decision maker, communities have two strategic choices. They can either try to diminish the power of that person or they can try to move them towards die-hard support. That is a strategic question, and when I do this with community groups, they have to be really clear of who is an ally and who is not, and they need to make a strategic decision of whether to try to bring those non-

<sup>8</sup> Schensul et. al, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Castillo, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> McKnight and Kretzmann, 1990.

supporters on board, or whether just to try to find somebody to run against them in the next election.

This is messy. This is not the nice process of “Let’s all get along and we talk about things to death until we reach a conclusion.” That is not always possible. It’s important to get comfortable with the fact that conflict exists. As opposed to taking the neutral public servant position as planners, the fact is that we do have political positions, and we cannot build models that completely separate our views from our recommendations. So knowing what those views are, and knowing just how far you are willing to go with the community to push those views, is really important.

The other thing that I often do with a community is ask who has access to community assets. We have lots of macroeconomic and Census level data that helps us identify what community assets are. There is fiscal capital; physical capital (the built environment); natural capital (carrying capacity and the natural resources available); human capital (the skills and tools and knowledge that individuals have); social capital (which is really important in poor communities, because they do not have much access to fiscal, physical, or natural capital, and which says what are the nodes and networks and relationships that we rely on to help advance our interests); cultural capital (those traditions and values that we carry with us historically); and political capital (obviously the ability to act in the political arena to bring about solutions to our problems).

Kretzman and McKnight define three kinds of assets.<sup>10</sup> The first category of assets are those that are accessible assets—that is, they are in the community, owned by the community, and the community pretty much has complete control over how they are used. An example of an accessible asset is a community bank—the community owns it, people in the community invest with deposits in that bank, and get loans from that bank. The second is partially accessible assets. An example of a partially accessible asset is a national bank that has a branch in the community—they have access to it, but they do not have control over it. The third is inaccessible assets. Again with the banking example, these are places where banks just simply have redlined and refused to locate branches, an asset that a community actually really needs, but does not have access to. I define a fourth set of assets, which Kretzman and McKnight do not define this but I do. These are imperial assets - assets that people outside the community can use against the community. We do not always see imperial assets used against communities, but I guess I am enough of a conflict theorist to want to ask: “Who is out to get this community?”

Here’s an example in the South Valley of Bernalillo County, Metro Albuquerque: housing developers have imperial assets there because they not only want to acquire agricultural land for housing development; they have the financial means to acquire that land despite widespread community opposition to that kind of development. The land is cheap, the city and

county keep putting services in there, and developers are allowed to buy up small family farms right and left. For farmers that I am working with in the South Valley of Bernalillo County, that is an imperial asset. They have to protect themselves, and when they do the power analysis, housing developers are highly influential and in die-hard opposition.

When going through these exercises with community members, it helps me to work with them on order to get a collective analysis and a collective understanding so I am not the only one getting this information, but rather the community is getting more information about how this all plays out. This methodology helps break down that idea of the singular core story. This approach helps us understand that there are people who, for instance, represent one aspect of the community that has lived there for 50 years. Then there are people who moved in 10 years ago, or came to work in the farms or came in the 1950s when the military base came in, who, as a result, have a different lens and different subject positions. This exercise of mapping community identity lets people identify where they stand on this map, and determine whether they are central to the sociogram or peripheral to it, and finally to determine how they can get themselves more central.

This is a strategic process, and it is one that is messy. I cannot emphasize enough how messy that is. Sometimes that messiness leads to a decision of a community to come up with strategies to protect themselves from encroachment. For instance, pushing for county regulations that limit residential housing development, or that support agricultural industry; looking at things like agricultural land trusts that make agricultural land more productive so that it is not so susceptible to developers offering more money for their land.

Protection from encroachment is one kind of identity practice. I call it identity practice because it is all based in preserving and protecting a community’s subject position and social location. There are other kinds of communities and the ones that I work with most are hybrid communities, or cosmopolitan communities, and they are trying to figure out what this map of identities is.

In downtown Albuquerque, the Albuquerque Affordable Housing Coalition got together to try to counter gentrification in the downtown. The problem was that that there were people who could trace their families back to the 1790s, families who had come in to work in the railroad (the railroad went right through Albuquerque in 1890s), there were families that came in with the military, there were homeless, there were businesses that had located downtown because they thought they could make some money there. They couldn’t come together to figure out what their core story was. Meanwhile Californian and Texan developers were coming in and buying parcels right and left.

<sup>11</sup> Center for Deliberative Democracy, <http://cdd.stanford.edu/>

It was a very disinvested downtown; land was pretty cheap, housing affordability was just completely going away.

It took some really serious facilitation, conversation and intervention from the Ford Foundation and the McCune Foundation to notice how many lots were sold that could have been used for affordable housing and to form the Albuquerque Civic Trust (ACT) to attempt to ensure that affordable housing was preserved in the move toward downtown revitalization in Albuquerque. Though the ACT wasn't successful, it led to the formation of the Albuquerque Affordable Housing Coalition which actively goes through what is called the "deliberative democracy process."<sup>11</sup> This process requires recognizing different interests. Because the cost of not coming together is so high, those differences became less important than coming together to figure a way to accumulate a "land bank" of affordable properties in the downtown and elsewhere that could be used to build affordable housing (and in some cases, to encourage affordable retail commercial properties). One of the reasons it has been so successful is that after 2008 and the housing bust, the only subsidy for housing or the only financing for housing was low-income housing tax credits and other federal subsidies. All of a sudden, the private sector wanted to build affordable housing because it was the only housing they could build, which was a lucky outcome.

I do think that the community process that which brought community groups together to realize housing affordability between 2000 and 2008 is important, and although they had their differences, key stakeholders realized that they needed to be organized to pounce on any land and banking opportunities in this complex housing market. So when the recession happened, there was an organized group of community members who could act on that opportunity. I hate to say anything was opportunity out of the recession, but in affordable housing in Albuquerque, it was.

Finally, methodologically, all of these community based methodologies require triangulating community identities, and my favorite tool for triangulation is the creation of triangulation matrices. I love matrices, because you can put really complicated information in a matrix, and basically read the rows and read the columns and get a pretty clear picture. Triangulation is just saying that we have these various different points of view (such as New Mexico Main Street state staff, the local Main Street staff, the ones who are executive directors of the local organizations, municipal employees, local elected officials, business owners and entrepreneurs), and there are a number of issues that each group with distinct points of view are addressing, for instance: "What's the role of downtown redevelopment?", "Who should fund redevelopment?", "What should we expect from the downtown redevelopment process?", and "Who should build our capacity?"

So as an example, I took some of the ideas that have come out of working with NMMS for a year and a half, and noticed that

there are some points of convergence for municipal employees and local elected officials—both believe that the state legislator and outside leveraged funds should fund downtown redevelopment, and that there should minimum municipal involvement. However, for the state, they really want municipal involvement, and they want investment from the city or the village. The staff feels so understaffed and overworked that unless people drop some money on them, they will just try to do what they can with what they have. The business owners and entrepreneurs tend to be very market focused, and they want the market and the State Legislature and foundations, but they do not want people being pushy in telling them what they need to do with that investment.

What we tend to do is think in Cartesian rationality and ask what the convergence is, and determine whether or not it is statistically significant. Never do statistical analysis on a qualitative database: you take really good data and turn it in to the worst possible dataset in the world. You want to look at the narrative in the stories and find out which of the stories are convergent. Municipal employees and elected officials are telling the same story, but it is really different from what the state and the business people are saying. In this kind of analysis, the outliers are often the most important data. We don't eliminate them as simply not fitting within our confidence levels. Even though they are outliers, you focus your energy and your policy and planning activity on building their capacity to do their work.

I wanted to end with in that thinking about the ethics of inclusion. Part of that is paying attention to the outliers—paying attention to the tails of the bell curve, and asking yourself, "What is it about that group of people, that subject position, that social location, that puts them out there?" And as planners, what can we do working with community members to undo that?

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