The Evolution and Growth of the Eco-Community Psychology Conferences

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Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s, community psychologists argued for shifting traditional approaches of treating mental illness (e.g. institutionalization, psychotherapy, etc.) toward prevention and more active involvement through community interventions (Bennett et al., 1966). In light of these events, researchers and students committed to the emergent field of community psychology developed several channels to exchange resources and provide support among one another over the past decades. This paper describes the annual Ecological Community Psychology Conference (Eco), which was created by professors and students in 1978, as a vehicle to promote exchanges of ideas and support among community psychology graduate students, community activists, and academics.

Introduction

The 1965 Swampscott Conference (Bennet, Anderson, Cooper, Hasson, Klein, & Rosenblum, 1996) and the 1975 Austin Conference (Iscoe, Bloom, & Spielberger, 1977) focused discussions on the role of Community Psychologists, specifically on the basic training and skills required to become community change agents. It was a critical time for community psychology researchers and students to develop a distinct identity from the dominating clinical psychology discipline. In developing the identity of the community psychology field, community psychologists required a mechanism to continue dialogue specific to their community interests and training across programs (Sarason, 1972, p. 1). As students developed interests in the field, it was important to create a setting that would foster student involvement and contact with other community-minded individuals. The creation of the first community psychology network in the United States began shortly after the Swampscott and Austin Conferences, in 1978 and was known as the Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference (Eco). This article chronicles the evolution and expansion of the Eco Conferences over the past 34 years.

Before the Beginning

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a small interest group of young faculty and politically active graduate students against the war in Vietnam and other social problems such as the civil rights struggle, who were seeking ways to engage in political activism through their work. Upon meeting other like-minded individuals at the annual Midwestern Psychological Association Conference (MPA), they informally discussed political problems as well as issues within the field of psychology. To them, MPA was only capturing a narrow view of psychology at

its annual conferences by including mostly theoretical presentations instead of applied research. They wanted to see changes made to MPA so that it was more socially relevant and inclusive of the emerging ideas of the time (Christopher Keys, Ph.D., personal communication, October 22, 2011).

Following the Austin conference this group of like-minded psychology professors and students recognized the need to build a sense of community among researchers and applied professionals in the field. Ed Zolik was the catalyst behind creating a shared meeting space for those who diverged from traditional psychology at the MPA conferences. As psychology department chair at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, Zolik used his own brand of persuasion in his advocacy for community research. For instance, DePaul University is a Catholic institution, and as department chair, Zolik would often show up to the rectory of the DePaul priests' with a bottle of scotch to drink to share with top administrators while negotiating department affairs and securing resources for the psychology department. This effective technique was used later at MPA when Zolik brought bottles of liquor to the annual MPA Executive parties, and during late night discussions with several influential officials, requested a separate space for community psychologists to meet and share ideas during the next year MPA conference. Zolik was given a room beginning in 1976 and his informal meetings (each lasting about an hour, with one or two moderators) to discuss a variety of topics became known as the ecological community psychology interest group. This was also the time when a network of regional coordinators for Division 27 was developing to help spur community functions and activities (Jason et al., 1985). Zolik's sentiments about a space for discourse and collaboration among community psychologists was echoed by Howard Markman at a later 1978

interest group meeting at MPA, where he and others addressed the need for increased contact and training opportunities among community-minded individuals.

Following Markman's symposium, students and professors began talking about the need to exchange resources and provide support for one another (Davis & Jason, 1982). The interest group agreed that the field required an outlet to develop a sense of community by way of individuals sharing their experiences, learning about what other graduate programs offered, and learning about research projects that peers were undertaking. To create this web of community-minded individuals, they decided it would be best to move away from the traditional conference model of formal presentations and to create an informal setting encouraging casual discussions on topics of their choosing. In the fall of 1978 the Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference (Eco) became the first graduate-student conference in the United States dedicated to Community Psychology and community-minded individuals, with interests in social justice and policy. Eco became the conference that incorporated the changes that this group wanted to see in MPA.

The Beginning of a Tradition

The first Midwest Eco meeting, dedicated to the Division 27 interest group, took place at Michigan State University in 1978, when a group of community psychologists invited other community-oriented individuals to East Lansing, Michigan for a weekend of Community Psychology and barbeque (McDonald & Beyer, 2003). The first Eco conference was successful, hosting community-minded psychologists from eight universities and community-minded practitioners from four local human service agencies in the Midwest region (Davis & Jason, 1982). Graduate students and faculty members in the East Lansing area opened their homes to host attending members from out of town, making lodging free for all attendees. This became part of the tradition of Eco for years to come. At the conference, attendees kicked off the weekend by generating a list of discussion topics that interested them. Then each topic was assigned a location around campus and members were welcome to join any conversation that was most appealing to them. This free-form lack of structure facilitated a comfortable setting that encouraged participation from everyone willing to share their experiences and ideas on the topic. The keynote speaker gave the only formal presentation and at the end of the weekend, everyone went to a barbeque hosted at George Fairweather's home. The

first informal meeting was so well received that the second conference took place just five months later in the spring at Indiana University in Bloomington. Continuing with the tradition, all lodging was free to attending members and the discussion topics for the weekend were decided upon by the group at the beginning of the meeting. Word quickly spread about the relaxed atmosphere and innovative structure of the new community psychology conferences and more people wanted to participate. With each conference, attendance increased and invitations extended beyond local regions.

The third conference hosted by the University of Tennessee was held in the Smoky Mountains at Camp Montvale in 1979—the first conference to move away from the university setting. This time, the cost of lodging was included in the conference registration fee, which was about $40 (Gregory Meissen, Ph.D., personal communication, December 14, 2011). The organizing committee members from the University of Tennessee were influenced by ideas stemming from behavior-setting theory, which describes how environmental characteristics (i.e. physical and social) can influence individuals' behavior (Barker, 1968). Therefore, they intentionally created a conference setting they believed would maximize interpersonal connections. The retreat to a rural location in the Smoky Mountains provided opportunities for Eco members to spend more informal time with one another and to create deeper personal and professional relationships. Organizers from the University of Tennessee invited a large range of people throughout the country, hosting representatives from as far North as East Lansing, Michigan, as far south as Tampa, Florida, as far East as New York, and as far West as Austin, Texas. This conference helped spread awareness about community psychology in other regions throughout the Midwest, facilitating growth of the community psychology support network. As the number of participating members increased and expanded beyond the locality of the Midwest, the influence of Midwest Eco conferences spread to other regions within the United States. For example, by the fifth Midwest conference, there were enough attending representatives from the Southeast region that they were able to branch off the following year, in 1982, to form the Southeast Eco Conference, hosted by Vanderbilt University and Peabody University in Tennessee. Likewise, the University of New Haven in Connecticut hosted the first Northeastern Eco conference in 1984. The Northwest was the last region to host its own conference beginning in 2006 when University of Washington

and Portland State University co-hosted their first
Eco. Table 1 lists the hosting schools for each region
over the history of Eco.

Table 1. Timeline of schools that hosted Eco Conferences over 34-years across four regions in the United States

Year	Northwest	Midwest	Southeast	East
2012	Lewis and Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling	Michigan State University	North Carolina Central University	
2011	Lewis and Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling	DePaul University	Georgia State University	
2010	Portland State University	University of Illinois at Champaign	University of North Carolina	
2009	University of Washington at Bothell	University of Illinois at Chicago	University of South Carolina	
2008	Portland State University & University of Washington at Bothell	Michigan State University	North Carolina State University	
2007	University of Washington & Portland State University	DePaul University	Georgia State University	
2006	University of Washington & Portland State University	University of Illinois at Champaign	Vanderbilt University	
2005		Wayne State University	University of South Carolina	
2004		Michigan State University	Cancelled due to Hurricane Ivan	
2003		DePaul University	Georgia State University	
2002		University of Illinois at Chicago	Vanderbilt University	
2001		Wayne State University		
2000		Michigan State University	Georgia State University	
1999		DePaul University	University of South Carolina	
1998		Loyola University	Georgia State University	
1997		University of Illinois at Chicago	North Carolina State University	
1996		University of Illinois at Champaign		
1995		Michigan State University	University of Virginia	
1994		Bowling Green State University	University of North Carolina	New York University
1993		DePaul University	Georgia State University	
1992		University of Illinois at Champaign	North Carolina State University	
1991		Loyola University	University of South Carolina	
1990		Michigan State University & University of Michigan	Virginia Commonwealth University	Burlington, Vermont
1989		Bowling Green State University	University of Virginia	
1988		DePaul University & Illinois Institute of Technology	North Carolina State University	New York, New York
1987		Indiana University	Georgia State University	
1986		Michigan State University	North Carolina State University	
1985		DePaul University	University of South Carolina	New Brunswick, New Jersey
1984		University of Illinois at Champaign	Georgia State University	University of New Haven
1983		Bowling Green State University		
1982		University of Tennessee	Vanderbilt University & Peabody University	
1981		University of Illinois at Chicago		
1980		Bowling Green State University		
1979 (Fall)		University of Tennessee		
1979 (Spring)		Indiana University		
1978		Michigan State University		

Student Leadership Model

Over the past 35 years, graduate students, with the support of faculty, plan and organize Eco with the purpose of having an informal exchange of information and resources between community-oriented students, faculty and applied professionals. Usually on the last day of Eco, members decide which school will organize next year's conference. Therefore every Eco planning committee is a made up of a new group of students. At the beginning, professors planned and organized the informal interest group meetings, but by 1980, the students adopted responsibility for organizing the subsequent conferences. Leonard Jason recalls the events leading to the transition of power. He and his colleagues were in a room discussing who would host next year's Eco, when a graduate student in the room spoke up suggesting that because Eco was meant for graduate students then the students should be planning and organizing them (personal communication, October 22, 2011). Following this suggestion, students from the University of Illinois Chicago began the long-standing tradition of Eco conferences being student-run. Christopher Keys remembers advising his students from University of Illinois Chicago, while they organized and planned the first student-run Eco in 1981. "It's really impressive how Eco conferences have kept going since then, with student leadership. That's what helped keep it informal," (personal communication, October 22, 2011).

A Network Building Conference

The central idea for the Community Psychology Interest Group was to develop a professional support network, in which like-minded individuals could make connections and collaborate with other professionals. Eco certainly facilitated that from the very early days. One particular story demonstrates how early social networks formed at Eco can eventually lead to later professional relationships. During the early 80's, Steve Fawcett was a professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Kansas with very strong interests in community development. At the time, he was developing the Community Concerns Report which is a method that considers community members' perspectives while assessing strengths and problems in their community in order to develop ideas for improvement (Schriner & Fawcett, 1988). Jason recognized the interest overlap with Community Psychology, and he invited Fawcett to bring his students to the 1983 Midwest Eco hosted by Bowling Green State University at Yellow Springs, Ohio. Fawcett rented the university van and traveled nearly 700 miles with about eight students. This was the first time anyone from Kansas attended an Eco and most of the students riding with Fawcett did not even know what Community Psychology was. Fabricio Balcazar and Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar were two of the students that came with Fawcett's group. Both of these graduate students knew that when they graduated, they wanted to be involved in community work, but they did not yet know about the developing community psychology field. At the conference, they started connecting with many people that had similar community interests and they had long informal conversations with fellow Eco members. Keys remembers attending Fawcett's session and meeting his graduate students. When Keys had an opening at the University of Illinois Chicago in the Department of Disability and Human Development, Balcazar was the first person he called to see if he was interested in coming to Chicago. This relationship resulted in a 20-year collaboration between Keys and Balcazar. This is just one example of the types of connections that were made at informal Eco conferences, and this informal type of networking for jobs continues to this day.

Another example of purposeful behavior-settings is illustrated best with a story by Susan McMahon, who at the time was a graduate student. She remembers in the early 1990s, going to the Eco conference held in Dowagiac, Michigan. For her, everything about Eco was fun, but her favorite part of the day would be the two hours in the afternoon that were scheduled for free time. There were plenty of outdoor activities to do at the Dowagiac campsite. She remembers ropes courses in the field, paddle boats in the lake, and trust building games in the woods, but her time spent at the volleyball net gave her a distinct impression of Eco. As a student it is important to network with other professionals to gain insight on career paths. For McMahon, her networking skills were still emerging, and meeting with professionals was a stress-provoking task, as it is for many students. One afternoon at Eco, she played a couple friendly competitive rounds of volleyball with Christopher Keys and Joe Durlak. These volleyball games were an opportunity to meet and speak with graduate students and faculty members at other academic settings that were doing interesting work and also to talk to them about things beyond their work. The friendly volleyball game gave her an outlet to get to know two professionals on a personal level, which made conversations with these two faculty members less awkward or stressful.

Maintenance of an Informal Conference Setting

The early Midwest Eco conferences were held at different campsites (e.g. Yellow Springs, OH; Bradford Woods, IN; Dowagiac, MI; Saugatuck, MI, etc.) The first retreat conference in 1979 at Camp Montvale embodied all of the original elements of Eco, including: informal interactions among students, professors, and practitioners; the development of professional and social support networks; and discourse on community psychology. In the mountains, attendees of the 1979 Tennessee Eco Conference had an opportunity to interact in a unique way. Students and professors who attended these types of conferences speak fondly about the "golden days" with nostalgia. When Greg Meissen reminisced about his role in organizing the Tennessee Eco, he remembers why his cohort chose Camp Montvale.

> When we picked the site, we were very intentional about getting away from the university. We were reading all this stuff about behavior-settings and ecological-psychology and thought, 'we should be applying these things.' We knew that if we got everyone far enough away from society with nowhere else to go, there would be more opportunities and more time to bond and interact—not just professors catching up with their old buddies, or students getting to know the other members at their school, but for students to interact with students from other schools and for students from other universities to interact with faculty from other schools. (Greg Meissen, Ph.D., personal communication, December 14, 2011)

In 1979, Eco was buzzing with ideas on how to become better change agents through the use of new research models, such as behavior-setting theory. The environmental change to the retreat setting was able to break down hierarchical barriers between students and professors. Professors, students, and community professionals were dressed casually for Eco and the retreat setting was a supportive environment for a relaxed discussion format and it allowed for the natural building of professional networks.

Eco conferences moved away from the traditional structures and tried to promote more interpersonal interactions. For example, the first couple of conferences generated a list of possible discussion topics on site and assigned the topics to separate areas around the meeting space, whether it was at the University or at a retreat setting. There were hardly any formal presentations with the exception of the keynote speaker. At the first Eco, there was no official schedule distributed to the attendees prior to the meeting. However, at the 1981 Eco—the first student-run conference at the University of Illinois at Chicago—people submitted proposals and were given a small book of presentations (Christopher Keys, Ph.D., personal communication, October 22, 2011).

The change to a more structured conference was frustrating for some original Eco participants. For instance, at the Volo, Illinois Conference in 1981, hosted by the University of Illinois at Chicago, one attendee became so enraged that the conference strayed from its original informal nature that he commented that it had "lost its spirit!" (Christopher Keys, personal communication, October 22, 2011.). While some felt that the conference had lost its innovative and unique atmosphere, others saw this as a natural progression that was necessary for accommodating the increasing number of attendees each year. As Eco became more inclusive, with more members submitting proposals, more structure was necessary to provide everyone the opportunity to share their research and ideas. Though the Eco conference model had to shift the focus from lack of structure to more formal organization, some of the original elements remain constant (e.g., semi-formal dress code and occasionally non-traditional conference setting, etc.)

Other Challenges

The student planning committees try to sustain the primary elements of the early Eco conferences (i.e. informally making personal and professional connections, inclusiveness of all community-minded people, and student leadership in the planning and organization of Eco conferences), and have faced a number of challenges over the past three decades. In allowing students to have a fair amount of time in formal presentations, it does take time away from the more unstructured informal networking. However, planning committees try to accommodate for the time lost by hosting a Saturday night Social Networking Event. Todd Bottom, the Chair of the 2011 Midwest Eco-Conference Planning Committee and graduate student at DePaul University says he found the Social Networking Event at Wise Old Fools Pub in Lincoln Park, Chicago, Illinois to be a great outlet to connect with other graduate students and compare their experiences at different programs, with different mentors, and to normalize the challenging parts of being a graduate student (Personal communication, March 28, 2012).

Another challenge for the planning committee is maintaining student interest and attendance at the conference. In the past, planning committees were concerned by the declining attendance (McDonald & Beyer, 2003; Kroll, 1990; Martino, 1987). One year the planning committee attributed it to the cost of the conference, and they decreased registration fees (Kroll, 1990). Students on the 2002 Midwest Eco planning committee delegated the work among members and each personally contacted universities, departments and individuals to generate more interest. They were successful in doubling the number of attendees from the previous year's conference (McDonald & Beyer, 2003).

There is an issue of sustainability with planning methods and a loss of communication between planning committees from year to year. An example of this can be seen in the 1990 Community Network Newsletter which addressed the problem of finding a hosting school for the following year with a cartoon of a woman blocking the conference room door saying, "NO ONE LEAVES UNTIL WE HAVE A CONFERENCE HOST FOR NEXT YEAR!!" Today, in the Midwest, there is a rotation of settings. The Northwest region has a plan of keeping the host school consistent. At first, Portland State University and the University of Washington-Bothell hosted the first five conferences, but now Lewis and Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling has taken over this responsibility. The Southeast Eco Conferences have been hosted mostly by Georgia State university (n=8), but have shared the hosting responsibilities with the University of North Carolina (n=5), University of South Carolina (n=5) and other Southeast universities.

Conclusion

The community-minded pioneers of Eco were eager to try something innovative in their field that would allow people to come together in a comfortable setting to discuss ways that they can engage in social justice. There are a number of benefits that came from the development of Eco. For instance, Eco has been student generated for over three decades. This is a tradition that has been passed down to different schools and a different cohort of graduate students each year, and has managed to sustain 34 years. Not only has it lasted over three decades, but other regions also recognized the uniqueness and value of such a conference, that three other regions in the U.S. started their own Eco conferences. The Eco conferences blend together the right elements to create a mutually beneficial support system among attendees.

This description of the Eco conferences is very U.S.-focused, with little information about international issues. We are not aware of Eco conferences that have occurred outside the U.S., but there is now a larger international community psychology meeting that occurs every two years. It is possible that students and professors either have more informal meetings such as Eco, or they may consider beginning them, and possibly the lessons learned in the U.S. can be instructive to others. Certainly, it is our experience that keeping the conferences specific to particular regions is helpful in both reducing costs to attendees as well as promoting a sense of community among those individuals who attend. Similar features might be considered by sites outside the U.S.

Though the Eco conference model have shifted the focus to a more formal organization (such a submitting proposals prior to the conference), some of the original elements remain constant (e.g. building informal networks, providing support for students, semi-formal dress code, and occasionally non-traditional conference setting). Current conferences are still successful at facilitating informal networking among students and faculty. There continues to be discussion about the issue of how formal or informal the sessions should be, and each year, this issue is debated. Certainly, from comments in this article, there does appear to be several merits in moving back towards more discussion-based or interactive formats. Regarding the future of Eco conferences, there might be ways of using the internet to broadcast or podcast proceedings to those that are not able to attend. Using new media for disseminating the rich interactions is something that might be considered for those increasingly technology savvy graduate students. Possibly developing a manual that can be given to succeeding Eco planners might help also capture the rich program development process that often seems to be re-developed each year.

Finally, community practitioners have almost always attended these Eco conferences. Their real world experiences have been vital educational forums for helping graduate students consider their future roles. Finding ways to include these critical voices in the actual planning of the conferences might be worth considering for future conferences.

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