The implementation of the constructivist needs research paradigm in inner city community needs assessment: A case report

Edward B. Cooney
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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST NEEDS RESEARCH PARADIGM IN INNER CITY COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENTS: A CASE REPORT

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
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Steven M. Steinberg
June 1995
ABSTRACT

This project is a community needs assessment using a Constructivist paradigm. The Constructivist methodology enlists stakeholders to inform the researcher of important claims, concerns and issues regarding the setting of interest. By emphasizing the areas of agreement and disagreement an agenda for negotiation between stakeholders emerges. The current project attempts to apply this paradigm to an inner-city community in Southern California. This report emphasizes the process and rationale for the implementation of the Constructivist framework in the community setting through the presentation of a case study of the Mount Vernon community. Through interviews with stakeholders in the community a "vicarious snapshot" of the community is presented in the form of a Community Study. A high degree of agreement was found between the stakeholders with regard to the problems of the area and the resources available to address these problems. After the Community Study was circulated among the participants, a negotiation process began, operationalized as a Roundtable Meeting of the stakeholders. It is hoped that this project not only will benefit the community of inquiry, but will also serve to encourage social workers to use the Constructivist approach in other community settings. The discussion section offers the researchers observations regarding the fit of this paradigm to community work and provides recommendations for transferability of this process to other communities.
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Overview

This research project employed a constructivist framework to a needs assessment of an inner-city community. A person reading this paper will learn that this "alternative paradigm" emphasizes the "process" of the research not the "outcome" emphasized in traditional research paradigms. For this reason the researchers have chosen to have this document preserve the process of the project itself. This report is a chronology of the study starting with its inception and continuing through its evolution and implementation. To achieve this the researchers have divided the paper into three sections designed to organize the paper to maximize its usefulness to the reader. The sections are described below.

The first section of this report, "Proposal", is the actual proposal submitted by the student researchers at the beginning of the project. This section describes the evolution of the project design and proposed methodology. It incorporates a literature review of inner-city communities and university collaborations with inner-city communities into a theoretical discussion of constructivist needs assessments. Only minor editorial revisions have been made to this document for inclusion in this project.

The second section of this report is titled "Findings" and represents the results of a constructivist analysis of the data collected by the researchers. This section contains a case study of the community of interest and a report on a meeting held with several members of the community about the needs of the community. This section also reconstructs the perceptions and impressions of the researchers in describing the community and the constructivist process.

The final section, "Discussion", is a review of the entire project with an emphasis on how well the constructivist paradigm "fit" for use in the community of inquiry. This is followed by a discussion of implications this project has for future community needs.
assessments and recommendations for implementing this paradigm in other inner-city communities.
Proposal

Focus of the Inquiry

Description of the Community of Inquiry

The Mount Vernon Corridor is an approximately eight square mile region in the southwest corner of the city of San Bernardino. It is a culturally diverse community with Latinos comprising over sixty percent of the population, and African-Americans making up the next most represented group in the population (REZIDE, 1993). It is a community that through a series of events has become the focus of the needs assessment project proposed herein. The project employed a constructivist paradigm in assessing the needs of this "inner-city" community, and was carried out by two student researchers under the supervision of two faculty members of the Department of Social Work at California State University at San Bernardino.

The issues that this assessment is concerned with have been evolving over a period of time. The two student researchers were initially seeking alternative methods of needs assessment, as personal experiences with traditional needs assessment models had been troubling. To be specific, both had observed that organizational and funding decisions based on "objective needs assessments" in which they had participated in seemed to reflect the values and biases of the assessors rather than the "objective" data they had collected. The search for alternative paradigms led them to the two faculty researchers who possessed knowledge of these paradigms but had also identified their own issue: the department's lack of involvement in its local community in which the University existed. The focus then became to attempt a community needs assessment using an alternative paradigm under the supervision of the department faculty.
Relationship Between the Community and the University

Very little has been written regarding the development of a relationship between a university program and an inner-city community. One field that has published articles on this topic is education where collaborations between university education departments and inner-city schools are common. Zetlin, Harris, MacLeod, and Watkins (1992) discuss the factors that affected one such collaboration. They report that one major deterrent to the development of the relationship is the discrepancy in expectations between the university and the schools. Another deterrent is the unwillingness of several agency members to implement the programs. Despite these negative factors, Zetlin et. al. report that an excellent rapport was established and mutual benefit was achieved. In the context of this project this information suggested a need for the current researchers to be aware of discrepant expectations and encourage active involvement of all participants in order to facilitate a collaborative relationship with the inner-city community.

Sarri And Sarri (1992) discuss the relationship between university researchers and the inner-city community. Specifically, they suggest that a series of "principles" must be adopted to produce acceptance of the university and any community change which may follow:

1. The proposed change should be compatible with the cultural values and social structure within the community.
2. The community social climate must be in support of change and local citizens/agencies must maintain ownership of the proposed change.
3. The community must believe a successful outcome is likely.
4. The process of change defines the outcome.
5. Those who will benefit from change must feel they are in control of the process and be empowered through the process.
Sarri and Sarri also suggest the use of a research paradigm supporting these principles. The paradigm should provide opportunities to develop and test skills for participants while having specific strategies to minimize resistance. They also emphasize the rejection of positivism and "scientific neutrality" and focus on the context of the community to be examined. Sarri and Sarri believe adherence to these principles has the potential to facilitate a productive collaboration between university researchers and inner-city communities.

Determining the Fit of the Paradigm to the Focus

Constructivism is founded on a subjectivist ontology which seeks to understand the perspectives of the researched (Guba, 1990). Constructivist research enlists stakeholders to tell the researcher what the important claims, concerns and issues are in the setting of inquiry, and so rejects the stance of neutrality and objectivity assumed in traditional research models (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Through a dialogue with the stakeholders the researchers identify areas of agreement and disagreement in order to develop an agenda for continued negotiation between key stakeholders. The product of the constructivist study is a case study which provides a vicarious experience of the research focus to readers outside the setting of inquiry. However, the "product" is not as important as the "process" in constructivist inquiry. Guba and Lincoln (1989) stress that, ideally, constructivist studies should result in an on-going negotiation between stakeholders that continues beyond the research phase.

Constructivism fits as a paradigm for this project. Tyson (1992) reports that this paradigm is sensitive to diversity in culture and ideology and narrows the gap between researchers and practitioners. This is important for this project as the researchers are outsiders relative to the community, not only geographically but also culturally. Traditionally researchers have taken a privileged stance of defining both the nature of the
data being collected and the manner in which that data will be interpreted (Tyson, 1992; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In the constructivist model the problems and issues emerge from the data, in this case the interviews with key members of the community. Hence, the direction and solution were controlled by the participants who comprise the community and are most affected by the outcome of the study.

Sharing of Power in the Constructivist Approach

The relationship between the researcher/evaluator and the community provided another impetus for the use of the constructivist paradigm in this project. In this study the paradigm was implemented through the researchers interviewing key members, or "stakeholders", in the community in order to gather their perspectives of the community. As suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989), the process of traditional evaluation provides the evaluator with information. This information gives the evaluator power over the community and its stakeholders since the information could have negative political consequences in the long term. Because of this stakeholders are vulnerable to exploitation, disenfranchisement, and disempowerment. For this reason, then, stakeholders have a right to provide input into the study no matter how small or large their stake in the community. Constructivist methodology seeks to balance the power between and among the researchers and the participants through the giving, sharing and valuing of different perspectives.

Constructivism's sensitivity to diversity in perspectives was important for this study as the stakeholders come from a variety of agency affiliations and cultural influences. Through dialogue and negotiation it was the goal of the constructivist researchers to value the perspectives of each stakeholder and increase the awareness of divergent perspectives. The constructivist believes that problems exist only in these perspectives, or "constructs", and therefore these must be the focus of intervention (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). By
highlighting the areas of agreement and opening discussion on areas of disagreement, the constructivist seeks "to develop shared constructions that illuminate a particular context and provide working hypotheses for the investigation of others" (Erlandson et al., 1989, p.45). Conceptually, this approach could have positive effects in the community long after the actual study is over as negotiation and dialogue could continue well into the future.

Comparison of Constructivism and Other Research Paradigms

Paradigms other than constructivism would be less appropriate for this community. Positivism, post-positivism, and critical theory all share the weakness of differentiating between researcher and subject. Positivism, for example, maintains that the researcher can examine truth objectively and attain a realization of the true nature of reality through examining the degree of causal relationship between isolated variables. Though positivists attest to their objectivity, the values of the researcher influence the selection of variables and the analysis of data (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Inherent in this "value-ladenness" of theory is a great deal of control over the outcome of research. Ultimately, scientists control the generation of knowledge and some of the belief systems of society, resulting in a "concentration of power and decision making that ill suits and ill serves a pluralistic and literate society" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 128). The people living in Mount Vernon, with their diversity of perspectives and experiences, would be done an injustice if the positivist methods were applied to a community study, for positivism would tend to devalue the residents' input in the design and analysis of data.

Post-positivism has the potential to fit the community setting than positivism in this type of community study. With its emphasis on collective input, qualitative data, and discovery of theory, post-positivism allows for development of findings from the unique context of the community (Guba, 1990). However, since post-positivism retains the idea that there is an "objective" reality which is "objectively" knowable by the researcher,
constructivism would better allow for the genuine input of all stakeholders in shaping the mutually constructed reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

Critical theory, depending on the application of ideology to questions of research, would also be a less appropriate paradigm to the setting than constructivism. Because the critical theorist retains a stance of realism, there will be an impetus on the researcher to fit the data into the researcher's ideological arguments (Guba, 1990). At some point in the Mount Vernon study, the critical researcher would impose a form of conflict theory on the subjects of inquiry and attempt to affect a change to "true consciousness" (Guba, p. 24). However, if this perspective did not fit with the perspectives of the community, the research would be less useful to the people studied than a constructivist study has the potential to be.

Gaining community acceptance of a constructivist study is potentially a challenging task. Positivism is the generally accepted paradigm in social research. Any research which uses an alternative paradigm might meet resistance, especially when that paradigm is as open and indeterminate as constructivism. Funding sources and policy makers may also reject the constructivist methodology, as it does not purport to find objective knowledge about reality. Adherents of the constructivist paradigm will face a struggle to gain acceptance for their research efforts. However, the case can and should be made that constructivism offers valid information about a setting by eliciting and valuing the perceptions of people involved.

Where and from Whom Data Will Be Collected

Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle

The researchers' entry into the community was facilitated by a previously formed coalition of agencies and individuals from San Bernardino who were seeking resources to plan and implement a violence prevention project. The researchers negotiated an entry
into this coalition with one of the members. To start the collection of data this person provided the names of five stakeholders in the community from the coalition as potential participants in the study. Participants were selected according to their likely willingness to participate as well as a belief that they represented a diverse range of viewpoints.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the student researchers. Consistent with Erlandson et al. (1993), the researchers reasonably attempted to arrange to conduct the interviews in the community of interest. This provided the researchers with exposure to the community and conceptually lessened the gap between the university and the community.

The stakeholders that are interviewed make up what is referred to as the "hermeneutic-dialectic circle", which Guba and Lincoln (1989) interpret as being hermeneutic or "interpretive in character", and dialectic as defined by Hegel as a "comparison and contrast of divergent views with a view to achieving a higher level of synthesis of them all" (p. 149). As the research process unfolded, two of the community stakeholders were no longer able to participate in the study, so new participants were sought. For the purposes of this study the researchers expanded the circle to seven stakeholders based on the researchers' construction of which stakeholder groups should be represented. Through a continual evolution of the circle, the research team decided that a representative of the following groups should be included: law enforcement officers, youth gang members, church leaders, and Department of Social Work faculty. Consistent with the constructivist methodology, the research team attempted to get a wide range of opinions and experiences represented in the research circle.

The hermeneutic circle is not limited to the stakeholders identified. The constructivist paradigm also includes the researchers (and their constructions) and relevant literature in the hermeneutic process. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989) the
evaluator's role is not only to solicit and value the constructions of the stakeholders and to teach/learn the constructions, but it is also the evaluator's role to be a "reality shaper". The evaluator has a function in shaping the reconstructions that emerge during the evaluation. Because of this the evaluator must recognize his/her own constructions, literally soliciting and valuing them as would be done with the stakeholders.

For this project the research team, and the two students separately, discussed their a priori constructions about the community of inquiry before initiating the project. One important construct identified was that the researchers would like to develop some kind of helping relationship between the Department of Social Work and the community. The evaluators recognized this but also recognized that the community may not need or want this. This construct is important because it can shape the researchers' response to the community, but the researchers must be open to the fact that this may not be a shared construct. Other constructs discussed by the researchers focused around perceptions of inner-city communities, previous experiences in the Mount Vernon area, and even concerns/issues in using the constructivist paradigm.

Existing Literature and the Hermeneutic Circle

Existing literature was also treated as "member" of the hermeneutic circle. Reading or being exposed to the findings of others can shape reconstructions. Traditional research proposals often begin with extensive literature reviews to develop the theory and problem to be addressed in the research. Because most positivist research literature makes generalizations regardless of context, constructivists believe that this body of literature holds limited value because of a tendency to undervalue the uniqueness of context (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). It can be used, though, as "snippets" or pieces of information and be introduced into the hermeneutic circle for consideration. In this way the researcher should be familiar with relevant research, but rarely do constructivists use extensive literature
reviews as background to a research project. Erlandson et al. (1993) suggest that literature be used to shape the evaluator's emergent design. Consistent with this the evaluators in this project, all of them new to the constructivist paradigm, spent much time familiarizing themselves with the available literature on constructivism. Much of that "literature review" is reflected in the body of this project. Erlandson et al. also note that the literature review is on-going as new constructs emerge. In this way the researchers are able to provide relevant "snippets" as appropriate throughout the dialogue.

At the beginning of this research project the evaluators acknowledged their relative naiveté regarding the community to be studied and its problems. A large body of work exists on the topic of the inner-city with specific regard to the concept of the "underclass". The term underclass is used to describe people who are "persistently poor across time, concentrated in cities, and prone to a variety of social maladies that set them apart from the rest of American society" (Massey, 1993, p. 449). In a review of the relevant literature, Marks (1992) reports that definitions of underclass vary over issues of race, ethnicity, employment and family structure. While definitions may vary, the characteristics are the same: poverty, crime, dependency, violence and unemployment. It is the relationship between these characteristics and the American societal structure that is the focus of much debate. The debate centers around the forces that influence the existence of the underclass in this relatively affluent society.

Peterson (1992) presents four common explanations for this "poverty paradox". The first of these is an "inadequate welfare state". This argument cites the failure of the welfare programs and institutions to provide for the needs of the poor in a comprehensive manner. Another explanation focuses on the "culture of poverty": This view holds that the urban poor have become accustomed to a style of life that has become self-perpetuating. Individuals become poor through a set of wrong attitudes and wrong
choices (Marks, 1991). A third explanation cited refers to as "perverse government incentives". This structural model suggests that welfare programs have created a series of incentives to remain impoverished rather that eliminating poverty as intended. The amount and availability of cash assistance, disability insurance, Medicaid, Food Stamps, and other aid are cited as contributing to poverty rates. The final explanation offered emphasizes the isolation of the inner-city poor through the changing economy. This notion, proposed by Wilson (reviewed in Wilson, 1992), stresses the changing American job market's impact of high levels of unemployment in the inner-city communities. The shift of manufacturing jobs from large urban areas to smaller cities and outlying suburbs has left the urban poor in concentrated numbers with little or no access to jobs. According to Wilson, such concentrations of low income minorities in the inner-city leads to dysfunctional social behavior which perpetuates the underclass.

While few would argue the existence of the underclass, Massey (1993) argues that experimentally and conceptually the underclass is represented as an African-American issue. Massey states that "Hispanics have remained an afterthought in most theorizing on urban poverty, Latinos are still being analyzed using methods and models developed with Blacks in mind..." (p. 451). Massey suggests that Hispanics differ from African-Americans in issues of within group coherence, race, segregation, immigration and language. Based on these fundamental differences Massey proposes that the Hispanic underclass cannot be understood using traditional underclass models. He recommends new models based on findings with the Hispanic underclass be developed to expand knowledge of the underclass.

The literature reviewed offers further constructs regarding inner-city communities to be included in the dialectic circle. The theories and arguments presented served to introduce the evaluators to potential critical issues that may arise during data collection.
The evaluators recognized that these may not be relevant in the context of the Mount Vernon community, and they must be open to alternative constructions that may emerge. The researchers represented these constructs to the various stakeholders in order to stimulate further negotiation within the hermeneutic circle.

Determining Instrumentation

Many traditional research proposals discuss the "instruments" or "apparatus" that will be employed in conducting a study. Guba and Lincoln (1989) assert that the instrument of choice for the constructivist is the human. This is because only the human is infinitely adaptable to contextual changes which are important as information emerges from the data. In this study, the researchers are the instrument and adapted throughout the inquiry to focus on the emergent and changing issues in the data. To do this the researchers prepared so that they will be sensitive to the stakeholders and so the obtained data will be accurate.

One way the interviewers (the two student researchers) prepared for this was by reading the available literature on the constructivist paradigm and discussing these with the faculty researchers. By becoming oriented to the model and its application the interviewers were more likely to carry out the interviews effectively and efficiently. It became clear, though, that there is no "cookbook" approach and that the methodology is determined uniquely for each setting or context based on the researchers' constructs.

The researchers also familiarized themselves with the previously discussed research on urban underclass in order to understand other researchers' constructions of similar settings. While these writings are not necessarily viewed as generalizable to the Mount Vernon area, the researchers seek perspectives which may be viewed by the stakeholders as transferable to the setting of inquiry. This body of literature prepares the researchers for potential claims, concerns and issues of the stakeholders.
Also helpful in preparing for the interviews was the background of the student interviewers. Through previous experiences in various social service agencies, both have been exposed to concepts of active listening, genuineness, and positive regard, and both have used these in different settings. Through discussion it was determined that these skills would be helpful in all phases of the inquiry in eliciting accurate responses. The interviewers also discussed at length the role of the researcher in the inquiry. It was determined that in this model the researchers are not "experts", but that perceiving themselves as "learners" and "teachers" would be productive. By viewing the stakeholders in the same manner equity among members could be maintained. General discussion regarding the process among all researchers is also important in preparation. Due to varying constructs and experiences, each meeting brought out new issues or potential problems that the interviewers might encounter. Just being aware of these help the interviewer adapt to the new information as is necessary under this model.

The interview itself consisted of an introduction to the project, an informal introduction to the method being used, and an informed consent indicating guidelines that all participants must agree to follow. These guidelines, taken from Guba and Lincoln (1989), insist that the participant maintain a position of integrity, share power, be open to change, be willing to change value positions as appropriate, and commit time and energy to the project (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the informed consent). Once the informed consent is signed the stakeholder will be told that the interview is actually an open dialogue that begins with, "Tell us about your community." From this point forward the evaluators and stakeholders engaged in a conversation that was directed toward an understanding and valuing of the stakeholder's perceptions of the community.
The Phases of Inquiry

Lincoln and Guba (1985) report that there are three phases of the constructivist inquiry. The first phase is "orientation and overview" during which the researchers become familiar with the setting of inquiry, and the stakeholders become more aware of the research methodology. This phase was primarily achieved in the first round of interviews with the participants. This phase engaged the stakeholder as an informed, willing participant and provided the researchers and the stakeholders with a basis of understanding and mutuality. From the constructs presented by the stakeholders the researchers developed an overview of the setting. The second round of interviews began the second phase of the inquiry, "focused exploration". Based on the first interviews, the researchers began to focus the sessions on the emerging claims, concerns, and issues to obtain as much information on the relevant constructs as possible. This phase was driven by the responses of the stakeholders and the interpretations of the researchers, and it culminated with the case study.

The third phase of the inquiry is the "member check" which was achieved through the round table meeting. At this meeting all of the stakeholders reviewed the results of the researchers' inquiry to determine its accuracy and applicability to the setting. Ideally, an accurate case study will result in an agenda for negotiation that is relevant to the setting of inquiry and has some transferability to others, and this goal was achieved during the round table meeting. These three phases guided the constructivist research project and are referred to in the Findings section as they directly relate to this project.

Planning and Data Collection and Recording Modes

An important dimension of data recording is fidelity. Fidelity refers to accuracy, which can most nearly be produced through tape recording of interviews. There are several issues with recording interviews that led the researchers away from this method.
The first is the concern that the respondents might be less open in their responses as recordings are permanent, irrefutable evidence of their positions. The second concern was that the constructivist interview is actually an interactive dialogue and recording often results in greater distance between the interviewer and interviewee.

The researchers decided upon written notes to be taken by both interviewers for several reasons. First, with notes the interviewer is actively recording and reviewing the information which is believed will help in processing new constructs and adapting the interview to the salient issues. Secondly, it provides the researcher with a record of the critical themes of the interview. Finally, it was expected that the note taking would provide more accurate responses from the respondents as they could get immediate feedback on what was recorded if they desired.

Of course some fidelity is sacrificed using note taking. Several steps were taken by the researchers to maximize fidelity. During the interview, the researchers frequently reflected back perceived critical points to the respondent for verification. Immediately following interviews the researchers, who have both taken notes, reviewed the notes, filled in missing information, and constructed an outline of each session, from which a narrative of the content will be produced. Finally, this narrative and any further representation of respondents' constructions was reviewed with the respondents for verification prior to making them available to any other people. In this manner, the notes of the researcher became the data to be analyzed.

Planning Data Analyses

Analysis of the collected data followed the "constant comparative method" outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985). The first step was "unitizing" the data. The data was divided into units that were relevant and uniquely interpretable. These units were phrases, sentences or paragraphs, and they were found in the interview and observational
notes taken by the evaluators. While Lincoln and Guba recommend writing each unit on a
note card, this project employed a computerized equivalent resembling that presented by
Erlandson et al. (1993).

The next step in analyzing the data was "categorizing" the units. The task here
was to group units that seem to relate to the same content. Erlandson et al. (1993) point
out that this process integrates the collected data with the researchers' own, background,
and the categories that emerge will therefore be their unique construction of the data.
During the categorization of the units the researchers developed rules that define inclusion
in a category and reflected the properties of that category. These category rules enhanced
the internal consistency of the category ensuring a reasonable representation of the data
was achieved. These steps were carried out by the student researchers with problematic
units and categories resolved as prescribed in the literature (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985;
Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Erlandson et al., 1993). Consultation and debriefing with the
faculty researchers was on-going.

The process of categorizing the data continued until four conditions described by
Lincoln and Guba (1985) were met: (1) all sources are exhausted; (2) categories are
saturated - new data collection yields only small increments of new information about a
category; (3) Regularities emerge within the categories; and (4) "overextension" - new
data is far removed from the viable categories and does not contribute to new viable
categories. Once the researchers agree that these conditions had been achieved data
collection and analysis were stopped. The crucial process of member checking will serve
to ensure that the researchers have represented opinions and experiences to the
stakeholder's satisfaction.
Planning Logistics

Both researchers participated in most of the interviews, though for two of the interviews only one student researcher was able to attend. The interviews were unstructured, open-ended discussions beginning with the researchers' request to "tell us about your community." Both researchers contributed to the interview by asking questions and sharing constructions. Interviews were conducted when the schedules of the stakeholder(s) and the researchers allowed, and occurred wherever convenient for the stakeholder(s). Both researchers took notes, which were analyzed into categories following each interview.

The process from final interview to final case report was as follows:

1. Interview was followed by a debriefing/analysis section using the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
2. The draft of the reconstruction of the interview was mailed or delivered to the stakeholder with a cover letter requesting any corrections or additions be sent back within six weeks. Agreement was sought by the researchers that the draft report was an accurate and fair reconstruction of the interview.
3. A second interview was conducted with each stakeholder, to review the outline and narrative generated from the first interview.
4. Final version of outline and narrative, updated with changes from the second interview, was mailed or delivered. Phone contact was made within a week of mailing to confirm member acceptance of final version.
5. Following the last member check, each interview was cross-analyzed with the results of other interviews, to determine which of the categories generated from
each interview can be matched. A beginning list of identified claims, concerns and issues (CC&I) was generated.

6. A draft was delivered, summarizing the CC&I of the stakeholders as identified by the researchers. A cover letter was included asking for their participation in a round table discussion.

7. A round table discussion was scheduled with all participants involved. Three topics were introduced by the researchers: the stakeholders' community of Mount Vernon; the role of the school in the community; and the experience of the constructivist study itself. From the results of these discussions, an agenda for further negotiation was generated that was agreed upon by all stakeholders as the prevailing CC&I at the present time.

8. A final case report was generated and is included in the following section, with the following elements:

   a. A list of identified CC&I for further negotiation, compiled from the individual interviews.

   b. A summary of the roundtable discussion.

Termination of the constructivist study occurred when the final case report was given to all participants. The student researchers encouraged the stakeholders, including the University, to continue negotiation, and offered to continue their involvement in the project if the community stakeholders invited them.

Quality Control

Guba and Lincoln (1989) propose several criteria for judging the quality of constructivist research and these ideas are expanded in Erlandson et al (1993). One criteria is referred to as parallel criteria, or "trustworthiness". In the proposed study many of the techniques to establish trustworthiness were employed. One technique was
prolonged engagement at the site. By carrying out interviews in the community of interest as well as being open to other forms of exposure to the community that were recommended, the evaluators hoped to establish trust and rapport with the stakeholders and the community. Member checks were another technique to develop trustworthiness. These were used throughout the study as indicated to verify information. This criteria was enhanced through the note-taking and journal writing of the evaluators. Leaving a "paper trail" provides credibility to the process and design and gives the evaluators verifiable information to fall back on if conflictual information is presented.

Another criteria on which to judge the quality of a constructivist research project is the hermeneutic circle itself. Proper use of the hermeneutic dialectic process inherently minimizes errors in data collection because the data can be immediately fed back to the source and revised as necessary. Because the information was continually shared, challenged and inspected there was little chance for secretiveness and withholding of information. The agreement of all participants in this project to adhere to the guidelines, including the researchers, also minimized the effects of researcher bias. This was especially true with frequent member checks built into the design.

Much of the information presented in this project reflects how the researchers planned to make the project a good constructivist study. Starting with the researchers' study of constructivism and continuing through the evolution of the research, this project attempted to apply the paradigm to the Mount Vernon community. By getting a "vicarious snapshot" of the community through the eyes of its stakeholders, it was hoped that the individuals participating in the project, as well as the Department of Social Work and the community as a whole, would be illuminated regarding the unique qualities of life in the Mount Vernon corridor. It was further hoped that this project will be a building
block upon which to continue the dialogue and negotiations leading to change in the community.
Findings
Introduction

The "data" for this project is the claims, concerns and issues which emerged from the interviews with the stakeholders. All interviews took place in the Mount Vernon community, except one that was held at local neutral site at the stakeholder's request. Following a brief description of the project and guidelines each stakeholder was requested to, "Tell us about your community." The dialog between the researchers and the stakeholder persisted until the stakeholder acknowledged that the community was portrayed satisfactorily and the researchers agreed they had an understanding of the stakeholder's perspective. This process reflects the Lincoln and Guba's first phase of the inquiry, "orientation and overview". Through this process the researchers are oriented to the community and its needs, and an overview of the community begins to emerge.

These initial interviews revealed to the researchers a pattern of agreement among the stakeholders of multiple problems in the community. The bulk of the interviews consisted of discussion about these problems, with very little focus on the positive aspects. The stakeholders seemed to identify the community based on negative factors, though the interview process did not seem to identify that researchers wanted to know about the problems. There was also consistent agreement across stakeholders with respect to the specific problems faced by the community. Some of the problems identified across stakeholders were poverty, crime, unemployment, gangs, and drugs. These are consistent with the reviewed literature on inner-city communities. These initial interviews revealed no obvious areas of disagreement among the participants despite researchers presenting others' constructs in attempts to clarify perspectives.

As proposed the researchers met following the interviews to review content, compare perceptions, unitize the "data" and reconstruct the interview to reflect the participant's perceptions. The researchers' notes were first used to develop an outline
which consisted of the unitized categories. From this outline a narrative report of the interview was constructed, and both were sent to the participant for review. A second interview was scheduled which began the second phase of the inquiry, "focused inquiry". During this interview the information in the outline and narrative was confirmed, clarified, and corrected as directed by the stakeholder. Also, the researchers began to focus the discussion around the common problems emerging in the interviews and perceived causes and possible interventions. Other participants' constructions were also presented at this time. What resulted was a clearer representation of the person's perception of the community, enhancing of the researchers knowledge of the community and the raising of the stakeholder's awareness of others' perspectives. The researchers expected many areas of disagreement to emerge at this stage but were surprised at the level of agreement among stakeholders. When confronted with other constructs the stakeholders agreed with the perceptions or were open to the possibility of the validity of the construct. This seemed to reflect the shared perception of the complexity of the communities problems by all the stakeholders.

Following the second interviews the researchers met to unitize any new information and develop the "Community Study". Using the constant comparative method, the qualitative data was compiled into like categories using a computer-based method developed by the researchers. An outline of the compiled "data" was developed reflecting the categories, and from this outline a narrative was constructed. This narrative consists of the claims, concerns, and issues which emerged from the inquiry and is referred to as the "Community Study". Demographic information from the literature reviewed is also included to enhance this "vicarious snapshot" of the Mount Vernon community. The document is divided into three sections, "Description of Mount Vernon", "Responses" and "Conclusions" for organizational reasons. The Community Study was given to each
memberof the hermeneutic circle for review and revision, and it was then used to start the negotiation process at the Round Table discussion. What follows is the Community Study as presented to the stakeholders. It is offered here because it is the researchers' analysis of the qualitative data based on the constant comparative method.

Community Study: Description of Mount Vernon

The Mount Vernon Corridor is a community in the southwest corner of the city of San Bernardino covering an area of approximately eight square miles. It is a culturally diverse community with the dominant ethnic group being people of Hispanic origin who make up over sixty percent of the population. People of African American descent make up the next largest represented group in the community (REZIDE, 1993). The Mount Vernon area is an "inner-city" community as described in the popular and scholarly literature. The characteristics of the Mount Vernon community are consistent with those of similar communities across the United States. The research literature states poverty, crime, dependency, violence and unemployment are common characteristics of the inner-city communities in the United States. The following information obtained from various community members reflects these common characteristics but also highlights some of the unique characteristics of the Mount Vernon community.

Poverty was an identified problem in all of the stakeholder interviews in this project. This perception is consistent with census data, which indicate that over forty-six percent of the households in the Mount Vernon area have an income of under $20,000 (REZIDE, 1993).

Unemployment is high in the area and many local business sites are vacant. Existing businesses in the community hire from outside rather than give the jobs to local residents. Jobs are not available in the community and jobs outside of the community are not accessible.
Crime is an oft cited problem in the Mount Vernon Corridor. In terms of frequency and type of crimes there has been little change in the past two decades, according to one member. There are a couple of factors contributing to the high levels of crime. The first of these is the relocation of ex-convicts from Los Angeles County to the Inland Empire. Another factor is the fact that for some, jail is perceived as a better option than the hardship of their lives in the community. Along with other forms of crime discussed herein, graffiti and prostitution are also common in the community.

There is a high incidence of violence in Mount Vernon. One participant suggested that it is an everyday occurrence to be confronted with death in the community. The face of violence in the community has changed in recent years. Twenty years ago people were fighting with fists. More recent times have seen a shift to the use of various weapons to current times when guns are readily available and frequently used. This reflects a national trend that exists even outside of the inner-city neighborhoods, and which necessitates that each and every person be constantly aware of risk and potential danger.

Drugs and drug use are rampant in the community. Drug houses are interspersed throughout the community and methamphetamine trafficking is high. For many in the community selling drugs is a source of income. Fearing retaliation, many citizens do not report drug activity to law enforcement agencies, so little is accomplished in stopping this.

Racism is also prevalent in the community. Much of the tensions exist between ethnic groups, but some was described within ethnic groups. For example, there is rising tensions between Mexican-Americans and Mexicans here illegally. The illegal immigrants are perceived as a "lower-class" and have been treated poorly for many years by the Mexican-Americans. Also, many recent public aid programs have developed to meet the needs of those here illegally, but the basic needs of those here legally go unmet, thus increasing tensions. Specifically, the lack of adequate public health services for legal
immigrants was mentioned. Because of the rising number of illegal immigrants concerns over intraracial tensions are growing.

The media in the San Bernardino vicinity tend to focus on the negative aspects of the community. This not only has a negative effect on the community image by promoting corruption and crime, but also produces "copycat" crimes within the community.

Gang activity is prevalent in the Mount Vernon area. Gangs have a long history in the community. There have been five generations of gangs which has created a "family legacy" of gang membership for many of today's youth involved in gangs. Their fathers, uncles and older brothers were all active in gangs. Concurrently there is a family cycle of gangs, crime and jail. One stakeholder suggested that there are currently four major gangs active in the area, with more recent gangs forming out of gangs from surrounding areas. The gangs are formed around ethnic and racial lines. Violence, vandalism, drug use, and graffiti are common among gangs in the community. Consistent with violence in the community-at-large, gun use is rising in recent years. Gang membership is also getting younger and younger in recent times with nine and ten year-olds commonly active. the prevalent attitude of gang members is "get them before they get you", according to one community member. Gang membership is a way of connecting with the community for some. It offers a means of survival and is a source of love and support that many gang members do not get at home.

Youth in the community face a variety of obstacles. The incidence of teen pregnancy is very high and local health agencies are inadequate in meeting prenatal health care needs of teenagers. Teenage parents rarely have an opportunity to complete their education because of the demands of parenting. The high incidence of gang activity, drug use, and crime, combined with the influence of peer pressure, present the youth members of the community with few options to succeed. Positive alternatives to crime and violence
are needed. Youth recreation programs exist but are not adequate in many cases. A general lack of outreach toward youth was also cited. As one member stated, "they need hope...something to live for."

Family relationships are important in the lives of youth in the community. Often, parents or youth must choose between family and crime. A life of crime can mean loss of family through jail sentences. Also, girlfriends and wives can be influential in keeping males from engaging in criminal and self-destructive behaviors. For example, it was stated that most "gang-bangers" are single or unattached. Also influential in changing the behaviors of youth is having children. Having children confronts the parent with the importance of choosing between family and crime, and forces consideration of the previously mentioned family cycle of gangs, crime and jail.

The people of the Mount Vernon Corridor are good people in a troubled community. They are frustrated but have a desire to learn and grow in their community. Much of their strength lies in their spirituality, evidenced in the breadth of the church community in Mount Vernon. Christianity provides motivation to change and, through prayer and faith, members of the church community seek strength to survive and create a better environment.

Discussions of the above problems, issues and concerns reflected an interconnectedness among the issues, not discrete ones as they are presented here. One person spoke of unemployment leading to higher crime rates. Another stakeholder stated the opinion that the high incidence of violence resulted from a breakdown of the family unit. These perspectives point to the complexity of the issues and problems that confront the Mount Vernon community and the people and agencies that attempt to affect some change in the community.
Community Study: Responses

In our interviews with the stakeholders in the Mount Vernon community, attention was paid to the efforts by organizations and individuals to address the myriad needs of the area's residents. The following is a summary of the responses either currently underway or being proposed as interventions that will improve the community.

Schools

Some of the participants identified that schools had the potential to influence the development of children, especially since so much of the children's time is spent there. If the schools addressed problems (such as violent behavior or drug usage) earlier in the development of children, there would be smaller numbers of juvenile offenders in their adolescent years. There is an unaddressed need for crisis intervention counselors in the public schools, a budget item which was cut as school funding diminished. Additionally, school counselors need to step out of their current roles as academic advisors and learn what is happening with their students.

Role Models

The youth of the Mount Vernon area would benefit from role models who could influence their development, according to one stakeholder. Role models are needed in the family, church, and the community as a whole. The central idea in this discussion of role models was that if each person worked to improve his or her group, eventually the entire society would be improved. This is consistent with a "ripple effect" that was also identified in families where one gang-identified member of the family becomes employed. The situation of the family will often improve from this decision, and other problems will tend to resolve as an outgrowth.
Churches

Religion was identified as a positive influence on the community. Churches give people a place to belong, and can often help people find meaning in their lives. Churches also have material and spiritual resources that could be helpful in changing the community in a positive way. Rehabilitative programs that employ religion have proven very effective in helping clients to change their lives.

Recreation

The lack of opportunities for recreational activities was recognized as a potential area for improvement. There are few recreation centers that are available during weekends or evenings. Entertainment facilities, such as movies, sports, or restaurants, are almost completely absent from the Mount Vernon corridor, limiting opportunities for area youth. While many agencies in the area do a good job at reaching youth, there was a sense that increased efforts are warranted through expanding hours or increasing outreach.

Youth/Gang Intervention Program

We interviewed two participants and two employees involved in a youth gang intervention program at a community-based agency. There was agreement that the approach of the program was an effective way to address the root causes of the area's problems. By hiring youths from the community to improve the city, this agency shows the participants the value of discipline and structure in life. The program provides a positive experience for the youth by getting people from rival gangs to work together, thus encouraging cooperation and a sense of shared identity in which loyalty transfers to the program in a positive way. Rival gangs meet at this agency in a positive way, and what occurs on the streets stays on the streets and does not interfere with their ability to work together. Further, by hiring youth in a high unemployment area, the program provides needed wages to the families of the workers. Perhaps most importantly, the self-
esteem of participants is increased because they are given the opportunity to work, an opportunity unavailable otherwise in this high-unemployment area.

This youth gang intervention program also becomes involved with the family members of the program participants. The program works best when the families become involved in the success of the program participant and is supportive of their attempts to change. The requirements of the program are discussed with the family and signed by all members of the family. The efforts by the gang-involved youth to become responsible and provide for his family often has a "ripple effect" in both the community and family. When the community hires workers trained at this agency, the return on the investment benefits both the workers and the community.

Law Enforcement Efforts

The approach of the San Bernardino Police Department is based on problem oriented policing (POP) which attempts to take a long-term view of problems and is proactive rather than reactive. The community is more involved in this approach than in traditional policing models, and must be willing to work with the department on matters of common concern.

Management of the POP officers seeks to empower the officers to take the long-term approach to problem-solving. Broad guidelines for policing are set by department administrators and decisions are made within those guidelines. Officers use creativity, flexibility, and imagination to solve problems in cooperation with the community.

Another approach to law enforcement underway in the city is known as the neighborhood service teams. Representatives from multiple agencies work cooperatively to address problems. Fire inspectors, building officials and police officers are involved in the teams, and this approach has shown promise in dealing with known drug houses. By using both fire and building codes to prosecute drug traffickers, the team can often solve a
problem that the police alone cannot. Further, the teams also work with the owners of these properties to get them to comply with efforts of the Neighborhood Service Team. The threat of asset seizure encourages the owners to comply with the requests of law enforcement.

Multi-Agency Efforts

One attempt to address community problems using multiple agencies was identified as a promising effort. Centered at Rio Vista Elementary School, the project will involve a Neighborhood Service Team (see Law Enforcement Efforts, above) as the core of the project, with Department of Mental Health, Animal Control, vehicle abatement, Neighborhood Watch, and other needed service providers and programs available. This project was in the development stages at the time of our interview, but hopes were high that this cooperative approach would yield positive results. The agencies identified above were involved at the time this report was produced; the project has the capability to expand as other needs are identified.

Policy/Legislation

Potential benefits were identified by some of the stakeholders from changes in policy or law. There is an effort in the California State Legislature to limit or eliminate the placement of parolees from Los Angeles to the San Bernardino area. This would reduce the connection of LA-area criminals to this area, a situation which can result in higher crime in the San Bernardino area.

The recently-approved "three strikes law" was identified as reducing the desire of criminals to continue. The law, enacted through the initiative process in the California State election of 1994, provides for life imprisonment of persons convicted three times of a crime. Some gang members are limiting their illegal activities because of prior convictions and a concern over being in jail for life.
The third potential area of change mentioned was in the area of social services. There is a need for social services to come to the people of Mount Vernon, rather than expecting the people to come to the services. Several factors, including lack of transportation and a fear of crossing into rival neighborhoods, prevent Mount Vernon residents from accessing some of these services.

Community Study: Conclusions

There are a variety of efforts in the Mount Vernon area to address the needs of the community residents. The responses outlined above represent only some of these efforts; there are many other agencies and individuals that were beyond the scope of this research. Following are some of the common threads that were identified from the range of efforts represented in this study.

What emerged from this research project is the realization that there are a number of talented, dedicated people doing what they can to make conditions in the area better. Though there are undoubtedly difficult problems in the community, there exists a wealth of resources that hold the community together despite all odds. There is a sense in which the families hold the key to the survival of the area, and if the family structure is strengthened, the "ripple effect" will result in positive change for the whole community.

All participants seemed to recognize the need for interventions at various levels of society: individual, family, group, and community. Additionally, there seemed to be agreement that the agencies, organizations, and individuals interested in positively affecting the community must work together to be most effective.

Round Table Summary

The third phase of the inquiry, "member check", began with the round table meeting. At this time all of the stakeholders were gathered to discuss the representation of the community in the Community Study and begin the negotiation process around areas
of disagreement. As stated earlier few areas of disagreement had emerged prior to this meeting of the stakeholders, but the researchers believed that with the complexity of the problems which emerged and the range of perceptions which were represented that the round table would see the emergence of these. In this manner the initial round table meeting serves to focus the inquiry further extending the second phase.

The round table meeting was held at the University and was attended by all members of the circle except one. One of the two faculty researchers on this project also attended. The week prior to the round table meeting all members were provided an agenda developed by the student researchers (see Appendix 2). What follows is a report of the claims, concerns and issues discussed at the first round table meeting of the Mount Vernon community stakeholders. It was developed by the student researchers based on notes, perceptions, and impressions from this meeting. It includes the process, content and recommendations that emerged throughout the meeting. A copy of this document was sent to all stakeholders for consideration for future round table meetings.

Round Table Report

Introduction and Overview of Research Process

The roundtable meeting began with a welcoming statement from the student researchers. Introductions took the form of members giving their name and their relationship to the community. Each person present had a copy of the agenda developed by the student researchers and a copy of the Community Study, both of which were provided to the members the week prior to the meeting.

Following the introductions, participants were given a brief overview of the research rationale and process leading up to the roundtable and feedback was solicited regarding their experiences in the process. Generally, the feedback was positive, indicating that the group felt that the approach used by the researchers was valuable for
representing the constructs of the individual stakeholders and identifying the needs of the community. One stakeholder became more comfortable with the process when he discovered that other stakeholders to be involved were also community residents and people working in the community, rather than government officials or leaders. This stakeholder was more willing to be open in the interviews because of the researchers' openness to share information and constructions from other participants. This was echoed by another member as well.

Next, a brief review of the Community Description section from the Community Study was presented by the student researchers. This qualitative review addressed the condition of the community, a description of the people of the community, problems faced by the people of the community, and the strengths of the community. This review emphasized the complexity of the community and the interconnectedness of the problems faced. It also stressed the researchers' observation of the interconnection between the strengths of the community and the people, reiterating the sense of hope and motivation for change in Mount Vernon discussed in the Community Study.

Group Discussion of Community Strengths and Needs

Following the review of the Community Description the meeting was opened up to a discussion involving all members regarding the Mount Vernon community, its needs and possible action to be taken. The first issue identified was the role of the police department. The San Bernardino Police Department has shifted focus to eliciting community support to address law enforcement issues. The officers assigned to the community are seeking ways to establish the trust of the community members so that the residents will come to them with information to facilitate the safety of the community. One stakeholder voiced the concern that even when a community member reports a crime or gives a tip to the police, that "people" find out about it and somebody ends up hurt or
killed. Community policing has existed in the area for several years and initially worked in establishing trust, according to one stakeholder. It was reported that once the community established a trusting relationship with an officer, though, that officer was transferred and replaced. It was suggested that the department not only find officers committed to the community, but that the department must also be committed to keeping the officers in the community. Also mentioned was that the hours kept by the community police office excluded access to many residents, and weekend and evening hours were suggested. There was general agreement that some of the police department policies and procedures seem to perpetuate the gap between the community and the department.

The trouble of access to services for members of the community was also identified for other agencies serving the area. It was stated that many agencies are not building "comfortable" settings that encourage residents to seek services. An example was provided that many service agencies have workers dressed in business attire which can be intimidating. An application for a work program for youth was so long and complicated that many of those who received them never submitted them. The necessity of "packaging" services so that residents will "buy" the services was presented as a way to maximize the benefit of any program to the community. The group was made aware of a construct from the individual interviews that another concern in this area is that many services are offered in surrounding areas. By not having the service accessible in the immediate community many are excluded from using it.

Throughout the interviews conducted by the researchers, the need for role models for the community's youth was frequently mentioned. During the roundtable discussion the subject of "leaders" arose relating to those who might show others how to rise above the conditions in the community or how to make changes in the community. It was suggested that the term "leader" has negative connotations for many as it is associated
with government officials who claim to represent the area but are perceived as being "out of touch" with their constituency. Their agendas often conflict with the needs of the community. By contrast, a "role model" is perceived as a member of the community, living and/or working in the community, and motivated to change the community in some way through incorporating experiences in the community. One stakeholder stated such a person seeks to build hope by presenting options to others in the community. This stakeholder believes a good role model for gang members would be an ex-gang member who is leading a "productive life".

One construct shared by the roundtable participants was the need to establish programs which promote responsibility and dignity in the residents of Mount Vernon. One stakeholder suggested that a job program that helped him provided people that cared about him, respected him, and became a "family" to him. By attaining a job and getting the support he needed to succeed, this stakeholder overcame the adversity of the gang lifestyle. One member stated that jobs are a major concern of the residents of Mount Vernon. Another member suggested that having a job is a necessity for people to be able to meet their most basic needs. The quality of life in the entire community will improve if people have an opportunity to work, but little such opportunity exists in Mount Vernon. It was suggested that it would take a relatively small commitment from area businesses to have a large effect on the community.

Following this line of thought the discussion then focused on using the current research project and group of participants to engage the business community in a venture to improve conditions in the community. One suggesting was to take the Community Study and some "role models" to the residents of the community in the form of community meetings and organize them to initiate change. Another perspective shared was the need to educate the business community about the benefits of a "small commitment" to the
community by taking the Community Study and "role models" who have benefited from similar programs to business leaders. Programs like Friends of Social Work function to encourage businesses to invest in communities, and the support of the C.S.U.S.B. Department of Social Work in such efforts was offered.

Planning the Agenda for Future Meetings

Due to time constraints the discussion was halted at this point. The consensus of all present was that a follow up meeting would be valuable. Such a meeting was scheduled for three weeks later and an agenda was developed that reflects the unfinished discussion and future planning for the group. The agreed-upon agenda items are as follows:

1. Discussion of developing current group into a core group of stakeholders with a possibility of expanding the current group.

2. Discussion of bringing the Community Study to the larger community either through business leaders or the community-at-large.

3. Further exploration of the potential roles of the C.S.U.S.B. Department of Social Work in this community project.
   a. Educating businesses to invest in the community.
   b. Linking the community to resources.
   c. Placing resources in the community (i.e. interns).

4. Exploration of potential roles of the University as a whole in this community project.

Emergent Themes

Several themes arose during the first roundtable meeting of the stakeholders in this project. The first theme to appear in the discussions was that of trust, and it resurfaced throughout the meeting. Trust was emphasized as a necessity between residents and agencies, as well as between agencies, in order for change to occur. The issue of trust
was less obviously playing itself out between the members of the roundtable. Because many had never met before, this meeting served as a first step to establishing trust between members, a trust that is needed in order for the group to effect change in the community. Secondly, the theme of communication was present. Again, between agencies, individuals, or both, communication was stressed as a key to effective service provision. The process of convening in meetings such as this begins to build a level of communication between individuals and agencies that did not exist prior. Respect was another theme in the discussion surrounding the community and its needs. Specifically the need for service providers to respect and promote respect of the community members is essential in order to make services accessible and worthwhile, and should therefore guide this project in working within the community. Through the development of trust, communication, and respect comes a sense of cooperation which the roundtable members seemed committed to achieving.

Conclusion

As proposed the first round table meeting ended the scope of the student research project. The Round Table Report indicates the participants desire to continue the negotiation process through further round table meetings. As cited earlier, the aim of constructivist research is to open a dialog, produce a case study and begin a process of negotiation. Based on this criteria, the feedback from the participants, and the researchers' own perceptions, this project has been successful. A dialog was opened between researchers and stakeholders which led to the production of the Community Study. Further dialog was developed between stakeholders at the round table meeting and the process of negotiations begun. The constructivist approach to needs assessment in the Mount Vernon community facilitated a discussion on the complex issues facing the
community and began a process of developing a plan to address at least some of these problems.
Discussion
As discussed in the section "Determining the Fit of the Paradigm to the Focus" above, the constructivist methodology seeks to balance the power of stakeholders in a setting by soliciting input from representatives of all stakeholders affected. The application of the constructivist approach to a community setting proved to be particularly important in the success of the effort. What follows are post-research observations regarding the applicability of the constructivist paradigm to the Mount Vernon corridor. A description is given of the evolution of the stakeholder circle as the research process unfolded. Issues of transferability of this approach to other communities are then presented, in the form of recommendations for researchers wishing to employ constructivism in future community research.

Fit of the Paradigm to the Mount Vernon Corridor

From the beginning design phases of this research, the research team was confident that the constructivist approach would be applicable to a community setting. At the conclusion of the research, feedback from participants demonstrates that indeed the methodology as applied in this project was successful in eliciting and understanding the constructions of community stakeholders, determining areas of agreement and disagreement, and facilitating a negotiation process from which a new dialectical construction emerged. Several reasons for the successful fit of the constructivist paradigm to the Mount Vernon corridor are identified below.

The stakeholders who participated in this research project accepted the approach as it was explained to them, and were open with their sharing of information from the beginning. Despite the fact that the researchers were unknown by people in the Mount Vernon area, the stakeholders showed a willingness to share their perspectives. In the beginning of the first interview with every stakeholder, the researchers stated that the perspective of the researchers was that only people who lived and worked in the area
everyday could truly know the strengths and needs of the community. It was also recognized that the researchers may hold valuable ideas or perspectives to introduce into the discussion. It was this approach that was identified at the round table meeting as a major factor in the stakeholder's willingness to share information and perceptions. Since trust can be hard won in this community due to previous experiences, the listening and validation of perspectives helped to build that trust.

A further reason for the successful fit of the paradigm is that the intensity of the situation in Mount Vernon has led to an isolation and polarization among some of the residents. For example, it was identified that relations between police and residents are tense, as are the relationships between people of different ethnic, racial, or geographic divisions. The ideas of sharing power and being willing to change were presented to each stakeholder, with the understanding that each of the other stakeholders agreed to the same "ground rules" for negotiation. The often tense dynamics in the community highlight the need for greater communication, mutual respect, and the sharing of power and resources, in the belief that these are the only hopes for improvement of relations in the area. Constructivist methodology provides one vehicle for reaching these goals.

Another reason for the successful use of constructivism in this community lies in the reality that conditions in any setting are dynamic, not static. A community has many individual actors who influence the course of events. Additionally, there are a variety of external factors over which the community has little control but which may impact positively or negatively on its overall functioning. Because the factors affecting a community are indeterminate and unpredictable, perceptions of conditions in the community change constantly, and as such it is assumed that any "snapshot" of the community is accurate only for the time and place in which the information was gathered. Positivist social science research purports to find the objective, static principles or laws
underlying reality, a reflection of its foundation in Newtonian physics. However, relativistic physics has demonstrated that phenomena do not exist independent of the investigator, thereby debunking some of the underlying assumptions of Newtonian physics (Capra, 1982; Young, 1991). Constructivist inquiry, as designed by Guba and Lincoln (1989), integrates a relativist ontology with social research, and recognizes that the perception of the researcher is not something separate from the observed phenomena, but is indeed one and the same. The researchers assume that only through constant evaluation and updating of information can a valid representation of a setting be found.

Constructivism, by recognizing the interaction of observer and observed, provides a methodology for researchers who wish to gain a more holistic and sophisticated understanding (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

The use of constructivism is validated by dynamic systems theory, which describes the interrelationship between states of order and chaos. Chaos theory "elevates variation, change, surprise and unpredictability to the center of the knowledge process" (Young, 1991, p. 290). While the constructivist has an interest in issues of stability, order, and hermeneutics by which the setting of inquiry operates, there is equal exploration of the changes which occur constantly in dynamic systems. Gregerson and Sailer (1993) observe that qualitative methods are useful in describing the chaos inherent in social systems. From the experience with this project, it is believed by the researchers that constructivism is useful as a qualitative methodology that can capture the rich complexity of interrelationships in a community. Further, the quality of the research process depends on the interaction of researcher and community. Two different research teams in the same community would likely come up with different results, dependent to a degree on the personalities, interests, and skills of the individuals involved. This observation is consistent with a constructivist "world view" which sees the community as constantly
changing and the "snapshot" only accurate for the time and place where the information was collected.

Illustrative of the idea of change as a constant in the community, the stakeholder circle as originally conceived is not the circle that finished the research process. Two of the community stakeholders originally invited did an initial interview, but left the area before the process could continue; two were contacted, but chose not to participate for lack of time or interest in the research. Therefore, the researchers reconstructed the circle using recommendations from participating stakeholders and other sources. The research team identified the type of stakeholder group that would help elicit a range of opinions, and then attempted to identify participants. Potential members were contacted, the research was explained, and a request was made for an interview. If the stakeholder agreed to the guidelines contained in the informed consent, the stakeholder was interviewed and became a new member of the hermeneutic/dialectic circle. Flexibility is required to deal with the constantly changing community.

Transferability Issues

Following are recommendations regarding the use of the constructivist paradigm to research in a community setting. They are taken from the experience of the researchers, and are intended to help guide other researchers in future inquiry.

1. Researchers should prepare themselves. Pre-interview meetings are recommended between the researchers, to determine what the opening questions will be, and to devise an opening statement which clearly and concisely outlines the research process and goals. Further, time should be allotted within 24 hours for a debriefing session in which the researchers compare notes and begin the analysis of the interview.
2. Frequent contact with the stakeholders should be maintained, and a fairly short timeline should be followed. This recommendation grows out of the principle that the community is always changing, so contact is necessary in order to avoid loss of contact with participants. Also, since perceptions about the community are dynamic, a short timeline facilitates getting a "snapshot" of the community that fairly captures conditions at the time.

3. Researchers must remain flexible and creative in the construction of the stakeholder circle. Since the community is constantly changing, people who are willing to participate in the circle may leave the community or become unable to continue for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the researchers should anticipate losing some of the participants, and devise means of identifying new potential members if necessary.

4. Researchers should recognize that the principles of negotiation and sharing of power are necessary to practice in dealing with fellow researchers. Since the analysis process involves building a new construction out of the interviews among the stakeholders, researchers should be willing to engage in a dialectic process in representing the community perspectives.

5. Researchers should approach the people living and working in the community, not simply the government or civic leaders in the area. The perspectives of the "average" citizen are needed in order to elicit a more complete of the community. Further, it is a principle of the constructivist paradigm to empower the least powerful members of the setting of inquiry, and to make certain that those perspectives are introduced and valued in the stakeholder negotiation process (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Feedback from participants indicated that involving community residents rather than leaders facilitated their open participation in the process.

6. Researchers should make every effort to meet the stakeholders in the community being researched. This gives the researcher experiential data regarding the community, since
seeing the community can provide insights unavailable from verbal descriptions. Further, meeting on the stakeholders' "turf" demonstrates the commitment of the researcher to truly learning about the community and participating in a process with the residents.

7. There should always be a minimum of two researchers conducting the interviews and doing the analyses. There is a practical aspect to this recommendation, since the amount of work needed is burdensome for one person. On a paradigmatic level, the dialectic process in reconstructing the claims, concerns and issues is stronger and more dynamic when there are at least two researchers involved.

8. In the round table meeting, the researchers should pay attention to the tendency of people to advance their own agenda in the negotiation process. Rather than squelching this tendency, the researchers should focus on building individual agendas into the dialectic construction of the negotiation process. By weaving a common thread between the individual goals of participants, a shared agenda for further action can be constructed, ideally leading to an ongoing interaction between stakeholders in the community focused on solving common problems and building positive relationships.

Inherent in this last recommendation is the key reason why social work research and practice would benefit from using the constructivist approach in community settings. A central goal of social work is the building of connections between people in the hopes of improving the quality of life of individuals and families. Constructivism offers both a philosophical foundation and a practical methodology for engaging stakeholders in the process of research, facilitating ownership of the process and responsibility for improving conditions in the community. Further, constructivism allows social workers to employ their traditional skills of counseling and problem-solving in the negotiation process. It is for these reasons that the researchers advocate for the use of this paradigm in community work as a foundation for inquiry and practice in the next century.
Appendix A

Diagram of Hermeneutic/Dialectic Circle
Appendix B

Agenda for Round Table Meeting
Agenda

Round Table Meeting
Mount Vernon Project
Wednesday, May 3, 1995/3 p.m.-5 p.m.

• Welcome and Introduction
  Group
  Name and relationship to community
  What do you contribute to the community?

• Description of the Research Process
  Steve and Ned
  Feedback from Participants

• Community Description
  Steve and Ned
  What is the Mount Vernon area like?
  Who are the people of the Mount Vernon community?
  What problems are people facing in the community?
  What are the strengths of the community?

• Community Response
  Group
  What efforts are currently underway to address the needs of Mount Vernon area residents?
  What efforts are being planned or proposed?
  What are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
  What other things can be done?

• Future of this Group
  Group
  How do we use this information?
  What next?
Appendix C

Informed Consent
INFORMED CONSENT

This project is a needs assessment of the Mount Vernon community. The project is being conducted by graduate students Ned Cooney and Steven Steinberg under the supervision of Dr. Teresa Morris and Dr. Nancy Mary of the Social Work Department at California State University at San Bernardino.

The purpose of this project is to understand and value your perspective of the community through an open ended interview. We then want to interview other interested members of the community and value their perspectives and increase their awareness of different perspectives, of which yours may be one. Our goal is to develop a "snapshot" of the community through points of agreement and outline ideas for negotiation on points of difference. At various times throughout this process you will be contacted by us for verification of your perspective or identified critical issues in the community. You will also be asked to participate in the negotiation process in the form of round-table meetings with all other participants involved.

In order for this process to be successful all participants must be committed to the process and agree to participate within the following guidelines:

1. All participants must maintain a position of integrity, meaning no deliberate attempts to lie, deceive, mislead or hide information.
2. All participants must agree to share power, especially in negotiating on points of difference.
3. All participants must be open to and willing to change.
4. All participants must be willing to reconsider value positions if this is deemed appropriate.
5. All participants must be willing to make a commitment of time and energy to the project.

   We expect to begin the negotiation process in May 1995. We also expect that this will be an on-going process to benefit the community as a whole, and therefore we have no expected termination date for the negotiations.

   Also, please be aware that this project and the information you provide is not intended to be anonymous or confidential. Before your perspectives will be shared with others you will have the opportunity to verify its accuracy. The research team is committed to valuing your perspective and representing it in an accurate manner to facilitate a constructive process of negotiation regarding community issues.

   Your participation in this process is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the process at any time with no penalty or negative consequences. Such withdrawal would also include the removal of information you provided from the process.

   If at any time in the process you have questions, concerns, or comments regarding this project please feel free to contact Dr. Mary or Dr. Morris at (909)880-5501.

   I agree to participate in this project as described above.

   ___________________________  ___________________________
   Signature                      Date
Appendix D

Debriefing Statement
Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in our study of the Mount Vernon community. You have provided us with your knowledge and perceptions, and it is our goal to accurately represent these so that others may understand the community through the case study. In addition, a major goal of the research is to start a dialog between yourself and other participants in the study. We invite you to participate in the study beyond the end of the research phase, which will be the end of April, 1995.

In the future you will be contacted with a draft of our report on our first interview. In the meantime, if you have questions or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, you may contact the researchers at the following phone numbers:

Ned Cooney        xxx-xxxx
Steve Steinberg   xxx-xxxx
Dr. Teresa Morris xxx-xxxx
Dr. Nancy Mary    xxx-xxxx

Again, thank you, and we look forward to working with you.
References


