LCL BRIEFING #3

April, 2014

Life and Power

Notes for Leading Causes of Life Fellows Only:
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These notes were intended to be offered up by Drs. Jim Cochrane, Gary Gunderson and Teresa Cutts for the Works In Progress Faculty Series January 29, 2014. As fate would have it, that event was cancelled due to a "critical weather event." The discussion continued over lunch anyway with Paul Laurienti and Doug Easterling and then later in Tubingen between Jim and Doug McGaughey. This paper was developed for a public health faculty initially, but the stream of conversation was instigated at the LCL meetings at Mont Fleur that were very much about power, especially economic power (a word not often associated with the leading causes of life). This draft is something of a composite that seemed coherent enough to share it with the LCL Fellows so that it might gain more life, but still very much a "work in progress."

Public Health, like many fields of *actual* practice, is a field that draws from a number of fields, processes and operational tools, all linked in a general way in service of efforts to prevent, manage, ameliorate and sometimes even eradicate suffering. We tend to think of diseases and risk vectors organized in order of their pathological scale or urgency—the leading causes of death. The field, since at least 1848, has been shaped by the knowledge that many of those vectors sketch social and political fault lines that are not entirely accidental. From Rudolph Virchow to Jonathan Mann to Paul Farmer, we have known that public health reflects the distortions and disorders of power. And we have known that our work must be relevant to power in order to be relevant to health at all. Virchow said, "Medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale. Medicine, as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution: the politician, the practical anthropologist, must find the means for their actual solution... The physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor, and social problems fall to a large extent within their jurisdiction."

One hundred and sixty six years later one can still see a web of causation that drives the patterns of disparities in most US communities such as Winston-Salem. In Memphis (a religious city) we called these the four horsemen of disparities, reflecting the image of the horsemen of the apocalypse in the Biblical Book of Revelations. On the streets of Winston-Salem the four are so endemic and mundane it is

hard to notice them. But they are visible in the lives of a) vulnerable moms and their vulnerable kids, b) early onset and poorly managed chronic conditions, c) vulnerable elders and d) psycho/social/spiritual dynamics usually diagnosed and coded as "behavioral health."

This sets up the socio-political tension around this basic health phenomenon that draws us inevitably into the domain of power. The four together are a wicked toxic stew impossible to separate from each other in the lived reality in the streets and apartment complexes where the concentrations are most visible. But these parts of town are not just "underserved" or "under-resourced." They are not just streets where our public health programs have yet to work. They are the fruits of a long-running power dynamic that tend to replicate over time. Of course it does.

Power is the name of the complex phenomenon of the pattern of choices and complicities that freezes toxic relationships in place and holds them there. That frozen disorder is the result of power dynamics expressed in a web of rules, norms, privileges, stigma and layered social patterns that usually reflect gender, race, ethnicity or some kind of known difference. Power is what holds the disorder in place and names it normal, acceptable, perhaps open to incremental ameliorization over time. Power holds with force, if needed, and always has priviledged access to and sanctified approval for violence. The formal state functions of public health as utterly woven into this same fabric of normality, although usually in service of softening the worse effects of power or preventing contagion from spreading from the most affected parts of the community to the more privileged.

We tend to assume that power of this sort needs confrontation, opposition and conflict. This is why my own writing (Gary's) tends to be of little apparent help; and also why the Leading Causes of Life seems so cheerfully inspirational, but simply not relevant to these fundamental power dynamics.

Doug Reeler suggested another way of looking at power and the specific power of LCL. The language and ethic of LCL is relevant to the *release* of power. LCL names accurately the *dunamis* (power) implicate in the living human systems and associations that are trapped by the disordering power of the current normal. LCL enables those in positions of influence in those living systems to find an alternative imagination for the life of those systems. Those people of influence may not have the same kind of toxic power that holds disorder, but they can be deeply accountable for their complex role as an agent capable of nurturing the coherence, connection, agency, hope and generativity already there.

Power is not just the thing in the way, or the thing on top of us that holds us down. Michel Foucault's insisted that 'power is everywhere', diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1991). This is a big shift: "a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them' (Gaventa 2003: 1). Perhaps most usefully in seeing the potential relevance of the leading causes of life is to see power as positive as well as oppressive. "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (Foucault 1991: 194).

Of course, this is still not the same thing as 'releasing power' of people, associations or community. Still, it helps to undermine the idea that power is that which is wielded by 'those at the top' (whether in a family, a community, an economy, a polity, a society, a species even perhaps), and promote the link between 'ordinary' agency and power — I would here use Ricoeur's notion of 'the power to act' as definitive of human being, and its diminishing or destruction as the 'reign of suffering'.

The twist suggested by those working in public health is the link to order/disorder and via, Bohm, its reversal in relation to implicate order. Here power needs to be linked to energy in the African sense –

seriti—which is at the center of generativity. Thus power becomes vital to the capacity to generate. It is the thing that flows through and across the relational web across generations and among the present webs of transformative networks and associations. Nurturing those webs in all their depth and resonance is the heart of the work of life.

This is very important for those of us in the work of the health of the living systems at neighborhood, city, state and polis scale. It frees us from the passive complicity and "arrogance of powerlessness." (John Nichol's phrase). An alternative imagination of power gives us courage, or at least makes courage possible. That courage nurtures the primary virtue of tenacity. It allows, at least, accountability for the vital power we can nurture. Over time living systems tend to fare quite well in competition with the dead hand of power. Dr. King was not delusional in seeing the arc of history gradually bending.

What does this have to do with us in the faculty who are supposed to be in the business of thinking hard about things that matter? What does this have to do with the collaborative discovery of the LCL Fellows, who wish to be about the same common labor? Jim sketched a framework for evaluating potential social investments. Most of us in the faculty are not really community agents, but evaluators, researchers and such and it is rare we feel powerful. I'm thinking Jim's draft schema may be a foil for discussion about a different model of evaluation of <u>our</u> investments of energy, intellectual attention and programmatic creativity that we express as public health professionals. In effect, how we might be accountable for our power, especially our agency in investing ourselves and influencing the alignment of the assets of time, money and creative attention. LCL helps us be accountable for these vital choices.

Our conversations at Mont Fleur last week suggested it might be possible to think of the Leading Causes of Life as a way to systematically imagine a certain kind of investment portfolio that thinks of risk or venture capital in terms of searching for opportunities that promise to enhance the life of a community or social group. The goal of this kind of investment is not maximum profit or return to external (that is, unconnected or anonymous) shareholders. It is a form of social entrepreneurship. This model might help screen requests for resources, but also help proactive investments of time, attention and resources one already has. Anyone thinking of an investment would have to explain what they intend, why this might enhance life in what specific ways for whom, and how they plan to achieve this. The criteria they would be measured by would be the five guiding LCL premises (as we might also call them, with good scientific evidence to justify doing so). ....So there would be five primary scoring categories: coherence, connection, agency, intergenerativity and hope. Each would be scored, say, out of 20, with a minimum score applied to each category, and to the total for all categories out of 100 (5 x 20).

Because each of these five categories does have some science behind it, it seems highly likely that one could devise the right questions to be asked in each category to guide how a review committee, in discussion, allocates a score. That would require preliminary work and consultation with experts. But even before we create review committees, we can create conversations with colleagues about how we allocate our own time and attention related to a particular project being considered where there is a specific place or population whose life one wants to enhance:

1. Coherence (a sense of coherence includes three primary components: comprehensibility; manageability; meaningfulness)

a. Will the project help the target population better to understand their environment and its opportunities?

b. Will it help them find order, consistency in understanding their environment?

c. Will it provide ways of assisting them to structure their use of those opportunities?

d. Will it be manageable within the limits of the environment and the existing capacities of the target population? (Counter-question: will it create new, unhelpful dependencies in the target population?)

e. What knowledge does the target population have of your project or plans?

f. What buy-in is there from your target population?

g. How will the project incorporate feedback from the target population?

2. Connection (the primary theory invoked in this example is that of social capital: ties, bonding, bridging, and holes)

a. Will the project strengthen valued existing connections in the target population? (*Counter question*: Will it create redundant ties, that is, connections that add little or nothing to what existing connections provide?)

b. Will it strengthen valuable existing connections to other outside the target population?

c. Will it enable potentially valuable connections that currently do not exist? (Counter-question: Will it activate connections that may be harmful or threatening?)

d. Will it create productive pathways to other people or groups that enhance the goals of the project itself?

3. Agency (meaning the power to do/act; includes assets, intermediary agents, emergence)

a. Will the project help identifies assets (tangible/intangible) that exist in the target population already?

b. Will it help them better leverage those assets in ways that enhance their well-being?

c. Will it increase the value of key or needed intermediaries (people or groups who embody ties to external agents and resources from elsewhere) needed by the target population?

d. Will it reduce patterns of dependency and encourage independent action?

e. Will it enhance the adaptive capability of the target population?

4. Intergenerativity (duration through time, sustainability, collective wisdom, energy of youth, transgenerational ties)

a. Will the project contribute to a long-term, intergenerational impact?

b. Will or does it draw on existing collective wisdom in the target population, especially of the older generation?

c. Will or does it encourage innovation and participation among the younger (post-puberty/adult) generation?

d. Will it enhance the opportunities for developing the human capabilities of children for the future?

e. Will it improve intergenerational relationships?

f. To what extent does it consider the impact of its intervention(s) on unborn generations?

5. Hope (as anticipatory practice & imagination: embracing possibility, pathways forward, sense of journey)

a. Will the project help create a sense of new possibilities in the target population?

b. Will it contribute to imagining alternative possibilities?

c. Will it help map pathways towards realizing new possibilities?

d. Will it offer ways of setting objectives and intermediate goals along any chosen pathway?

e. Will it provide means of dealing productively and positively with setbacks?

f. Will it help people locate themselves in a narrative of a larger (beyond self-interest) journey of life?

g. Does it link a vision of change coherently to the production of agency in the target population (that is, feed into category 3)?

Because these five categories influence each other (they are not discrete, but parts of a 'gestalt of life triggers), allocating a minimum score to each helps determine whether or not any project under consideration is likely to enhance the whole rather than just one or two elements primarily, which would be to invest in a reductionist enterprise rather than an integrative one.

Base Fundamentals

A secondary level of judgment would focus on the base fundamentals that one would look for and treat as important. Here, besides the necessary quantitative economic and financial ones, I imagine two such fundamentals: a) alternative imagination and b) moral foundation

For A, alternative imagination," one would want to know from the applicants information and documents, as well as any interview process, whether or not the possibilities, plans and protocols envisaged for any action or intervention offer a response to the limits and limitations of the current environment or context envisaged for the action or intervention. Limits would refer to what the current ways of doing/perceiving things cannot in principle or are unlikely to transcend in any desired transformation of the environment or context; limitations would refer to what in the current ways of doing/perceiving things replicates negative outcomes, creates barriers to necessary change, or actively works against it. One would therefore test any proposal for the quality of its alternative imagination in this regard.

Regarding B, moral foundation, I do not mean personal morality or some religious or traditional customs and mores, but the Kantian understanding of a) treating people as ends in themselves and not means to some other end, b) doing nothing that harms the other, c) thereby enhancing their creative freedom, and d) doing so in a way that simultaneously enhances the freedom of all, beyond self/group interest.

The five primary categories could easily be applied to a wholly negative form of human association in terms of producing life for the whole (Apartheid leaders would score very well on coherence, connection, agency, intergenerativity and hope as long as one restricts their project to a particular people, viz. Whites in general and Afrikaners in particular). Accordingly, one would want to know from the applicants information and documents, as well as any interview process, how their proposal feeds into or informs a wider goal of life for all or, as a counter-question, whether it will serve only narrow goals and interests. Because particular projects are unlikely to be aimed programmatically at the whole, this is not so much a matter of programming as it is of intention, vision and mission statement about the nature or character of the particular proposal under consideration.

The Stakeholder Ensemble of Practices

This life framework finds further energy when focused through the triple lens of the ensemble or practices that emerged from the Stakeholder Health learning process that culminated in the April 4th meeting at the White House. That ensemble depends on power of the kind described through the leading causes as it is highly relational, not instrumental. The three are: a) focus on and move toward the most socially complex individuals in their socially complex neighborhoods, b) do so in large scale partnerships and c) invest one's own assets, resources, time and funds proactively rather than reactively. The projects, strategies and tactics that promise to express that ensemble are not just a different list of things to do, but a different *kind* of a list; one held together by qualities of life, that depends on a spring of energy that is close to what Doug and Jim have been exploring as Spirit. This suggests a different kind of accountability framework.

One of the problems with focusing on the framework of evaluation is that it, ironically, keeps the focus on the ones who think of themselves as having power, at least the kind that might be invested in another (as in money from a philanthropist or church committee invested in a project of some sort). In fact the LCL understanding of power is that it is "democratic" (Doug McGaughey). It is in everyone. TC pointed out that is also holy and thus unpredictable, not capable of being a dependable tool in anyone's toolbox—even those with good intentions. Sometimes the spirit power moves like we like and sometimes it doesn't. A movement is

what moves us, not the think we planfully move. The spirit—perhaps the power in the LCL understanding of life—is what uses us; not the thing we use.

Doug McGaughey noted that spirit's power is not something possessed only be the "elite" and the "geniuses"). He was responding to Jim's question of "concretization" (i.e., what difference does it make in communities like East Winston Salem?). Dignity can be viewed as something passive (i.e., we all "have" it) whereas "power" can be taken to explicitly emphasize what is implicit in dignity, the positive capacity of every individual to change her/his world (with others). It is a power that is greater than nature because it can destroy nature (the point of dynamical sublimity). Again, this places the focus on "causes of life" and not "hindrances" (fallibility or fate) or "what's owed to me."

All this was implicit in our discussion about Spirit, as it has been in the larger discussion about LCL. But I would think that we would want to make it explicit. It constitutes an "optimistic" philosophy of history that is not Pollyannaish (i.e., blind to physical limitations and the constant threat of mere "self-interest" and "backsliding" with respect to humanity's awareness of its capacities) but views "conflict" (as an internal struggle with one's capacities and responsibility as well as an external struggle with social circumstance) as "positive" in that "conflict" is the way that possibilities become manifest and realized.

In other words, the "power" of spirit is neither merely "peaceful" (often associated with spirituality) nor does it expect/demand perfection (either of the individual or of society as with Augustine; because both the individual and society are limited but for that reason "power"-ful). It can change (and can always change more) concrete worlds, responsibly, to the best of the individual's and the communities' abilities at a particular point in time. It is "optimistic" not because it guarantees success but because humanity's capacities of spirit will always continue to "demand" its (re-)newed efforts in the future."

This leads toward humility, especially in the relationships with those grounded in difficult and complex communities challenged by the toxic web of causality that is such an obvious proximate threat to life. Power to smash is not adequate to the challenge, even if it is a more prompt servant of urgency. And there in another kind of urgency that springs from the opposite direction—the confidence that we have sufficient understanding that we can manage the complexity successfully and thus deserve the privileges of managerial authority. If life is the point, we must work with its curiously powerful logic especially in relationship to the communities of hopeful practice that we life seems to draw us toward. Life gives us humble, tenacious power to evoke, encourage and nurture the power emergent in the complex human associations we find ourselves in. That is, I think, how life works.

Gary, with gratitude to
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Doug, Andy, Joy and TC.

NOTES