

# Lesson Five:

## Perceiving Communities through a Public Health Lens

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### Objective

1. To show how individuals and communities have resources (goods and services) and policies that function as both assets and barriers to health.
2. To teach students how communities can be viewed from multiple perspectives.
3. To illustrate how the physical transformation of a community can affect the health of its residents.

### Outcomes

1. Students will distinguish asset-based and deficit-based approaches to categorizing a community, and describe how each approach may protect or harm the health of a community.
2. Students will understand the value of viewing communities from multiple perspectives.
3. Students will comprehend how upstream causes (e.g., social, economic, and political factors) can influence health.

### Activities

Students will participate in the following three activities:

1. *Identifying Assets*
2. *Viewing a Community from Multiple Perspectives*
3. *The Perfect Neighborhood*



# Activity 1: Identifying Assets

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## Purpose

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The purpose of the *Identifying Assets*<sup>1</sup> activity is to examine how students view themselves, others, and communities, and to explain the benefits of seeing a community through an asset-based lens instead of a deficit-based lens.

## Required Materials

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The *Identifying Assets* activity requires the following materials:

1. Paper and pen or pencil for each student.

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1 Anthony Fleg, personal communication, November 2011.

## Instructions

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Follow the instructions below to implement the *Identifying Assets* activity.

## Prior to Class

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1. **Divide** the board or chart paper into two columns titled *Personal Traits* and *Community Characteristics*.

## During Class

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1. **Instruct** students to: 1) think of three ways they define themselves (i.e., three personal traits) and three ways they define their community (i.e., three characteristics of their community), and 2) write their responses on the corresponding column on the board.
2. As a class, **tally** the number of positive and negative factors listed in each category. **Note** if any themes emerged, such as if most students defined themselves by intangible traits (e.g., caring) and defined their community by physical appearances (e.g., clean).



Q&A

3. **Ask** the following question and emphasize the take-away message:  
Without given restrictions, you were free to define yourselves and your communities however you chose, and thus could have done so in a positive or negative light. How many positive versus negative definitions did you list?

### Take-away message:

If students described positive factors, draw attention to their natural tendency to see the good in themselves and their communities. Was it easy for them to classify themselves and their communities optimistically? While negative attributes may exist and may need to be improved, it is productive to emphasize the positive resources (goods, services, people) and policies of a community and its members. If students suggest a majority of negative responses, ask them why.



Read

4. **Read** the following to explain how communities can be examined using a predominantly positive asset-based or a predominantly negative deficit-based approach.

Using a deficit-based approach, a community is essentially judged based on what its apparent needs are, what it is missing, or what is “wrong” with it. Oftentimes outsiders – like the media, researchers, or others who are not part of the community – make damaging assumptions. Community members internalize the negativity, leading them to doubt their community’s capabilities and true potential. Stereotypes may abound, and the positive attributes as well as helpful resources (goods, services, people) and policies of

a community may be overlooked. The negative factors listed on the class list are representative of a deficit-based approach. In contrast, an asset-based approach prioritizes the strengths of resources (goods, services, people) and policies in a community; it is the glass half-full approach. The asset-based model is critical to productively evaluating community health issues and implementing public health interventions. The positive factors listed on the class list are representative of an asset-based approach.

5. **Ask** the following question and emphasize the take-away message.

How would students feel if an outsider (e.g., media, researchers, or someone who is not part of the community) defined them or their community (especially if they did so unfavorably)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being defined by an outsider? How does this lead to stereotypes and potentially harm the health of the community?

**Take-away message:**

While outsiders may provide information and resources unknown or unavailable to the community, both outsiders (e.g., media, researchers) and insiders (e.g., community members) must work collaboratively to optimize health. Just as students had the authority to define themselves and their community during the activity, public health work requires the participation of community members who deserve a voice in defining and directing their own lives. This is particularly true as community members can oftentimes best identify and leverage beneficial resources (goods, services, people) and policies that promote health.

6. Looking ahead: How *Lesson Five* prepares students for the remaining curriculum lessons.

*Lesson Six* requires students to identify resources and policies that serve as assets or barriers to health in their community.

*Lessons Seven through Ten* require students to leverage the resources and policies to improve the health of their communities.

Throughout the lessons, students should remember the importance of perceiving their community through an asset- rather than a deficit-based approach.



## Activity 2: Viewing a Community from Multiple Perspectives

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### Purpose

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The purpose of the *Viewing a Community from Multiple Perspectives* activity is to teach students that people, places, goods, services, issues, policies etc. can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Each perspective is worthy of consideration.

### Required Materials

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The *Viewing a Community from Multiple Perspectives* activity requires the following materials:

1. *Who Do You See?*<sup>2</sup> illustration to be copied for each student or displayed using a projector (provided at the end of *Lesson Five*).

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2 Hill, W.E. (1915). My wife and my mother-in-law. They are both in this picture - find them. (Call No. Illus. in AP101.P7 1915 (Case X) [P&P]). Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

## Instructions and Discussion

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Follow the instructions below to implement the *Viewing a Community from Multiple Perspectives* activity:

Handout  
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1. **Distribute** the *Who Do You See?* illustration to students or display it to the class using a projector.
2. **Provide** students time to view and interpret the image.
3. **Ask** students the following questions:
  - a. Who do you see in this image? Does everyone see the same person (older woman or younger woman)?
  - b. Just as some of you viewed the image differently, what aspects of a community may some of you view differently, and why?
  - c. How might different perceptions of a community affect the health of those living within it, and affect a student's ability to advocate for healthy improvements within the community?
4. **Make** an analogy between viewing an image of the woman and viewing a community; the two perspectives used to interpret this single image on a page are similar to the complexity of perspectives used to judge a community. For example, if a city decides to build a casino, some residents may view the casino as a source of employment, entertainment, and revenue while other residents may fear that it encourages gambling and drinking, and will increase violence and traffic. Both viewpoints are valid; the aim is to seek and respect opinions from both sides of an issue and work together to ensure that health is optimized.
5. **Read** students the following excerpt from Collins O. Airhihenbuwa's book, *Healing Our Differences: The Crisis of Global Health and the Politics of Identity*.



"Two men went to the cemetery to pay respect to their late wives. The first, an American, had a bouquet of roses; the second, a Nigerian, had a pot of soup. As they knelt side by side in front of their wives graves, the American asked the Nigerian, 'When do you expect your wife to eat the soup?' The Nigerian responded, 'As soon as your wife begins to smell the roses.'"



6. **Ask** students the following questions:
  - a. What is the key message of this excerpt?

According to Airhihenbuwa, "This anecdote exemplifies two cultural values practiced by two men from two different cultures. Neither practice had any practical significance for the beneficiary [the deceased wife]. However, both practices have such profound cultural value that



the practical irrelevance to the foreign eye is unimportant. The study of culture is a study of ideas and values. No one culture is more important than another, just different. Cultural differences are not meant to exalt one over another but to celebrate cultural differences even as we value their similarities.”

b. How does it suggest the need to respect multiple perspectives?

Evidence-based research studies suggest that resources (goods, services, people) and policies that harm the health of an individual or community should be discouraged or eliminated. However, when approaching a community to advocate for the reduction or elimination of risk factors, it is important to avoid passing judgments – like the man did in the Airhihenbuwa excerpt when he questioned why someone would bring food to a cemetery. Partnership is a necessary aspect of social advocacy, and requires those on both sides of an issue to respect each other’s perspectives to reach a successful, sustainable solution that optimizes health.

c. How can the messages in the *Who Do You See?* image and the Airhihenbuwa excerpt prepare you for addressing health issues in your community?

A single image of an older and younger woman, and a quotation about cultural traditions illustrate the potential for differing yet valid viewpoints. They prepare students for future activities where students will identify resources and policies that function as either assets or barriers to health in their communities.



## Activity 3: The Perfect Neighborhood

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### Purpose

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The purpose of *The Perfect Neighborhood*<sup>3</sup> activity is to: 1) show students how a neighborhood can be transformed from unhealthy to healthy; 2) emphasize the power of perception in seeing a community for what it is (rather than what it is not) and for its potential to change; and 3) spur discussion about the role of student advocates in encouraging change within a community.

### Required Materials

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*The Perfect Neighborhood* activity requires the following materials:

1. Computer(s) and internet access

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3 California Newsreel, & Vital Pictures Inc. (Producer) (2008). Unnatural causes: The perfect neighborhood. [Interactive website] Retrieved from [http://unnaturalcauses.org/interactivities\\_03.php](http://unnaturalcauses.org/interactivities_03.php)

## Instructions

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Follow the instructions below to implement *The Perfect Neighborhood* activity.

## During Class

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1. *The Perfect Neighborhood* is an on-line activity created as a complement to the documentary series *Unnatural Causes* (viewed in *Lesson One*). The computer screen begins with a picture of a neglected neighborhood. As students scroll their mouse across their computer screens and follow the instructions, the image transforms into a thriving community. Throughout the activity, the interactive program explains how well chosen changes can impact a community for the better.
2. Depending on the availability of computers and internet, either:
  - 1) **assign** individuals or small groups of students to a computer and instruct them to log onto *The Perfect Neighborhood* activity on the *Unnatural Causes* website at [http://www.unnaturalcauses.org/interactivities\\_03.php](http://www.unnaturalcauses.org/interactivities_03.php) and follow the instructions provided; or 2) log onto the same website and **conduct** the assignment as a class using a projector. If you do not have internet access in the classroom, print website images prior to class. Students may also conduct this assignment at home and present their findings in a report to the instructor or to the class.
3. **Facilitate** a discussion using the following questions:
  - a. How does this activity relate to *Activity 1: Identifying Assets* and *Activity 2: What Do You See?* Why is it important to consider multiple perspectives when viewing the community in this activity? How is it helpful to use an asset-based approach instead of a deficit-based approach; how did the asset-based approach help change the community, whereas how would the deficit-based approach have stalled progress?
  - b. What resources should be available to help neighborhoods transform? (e.g., funding, committed organizations and individuals, etc.)
  - c. Can you identify neighborhoods, parks, schools, etc. that have been enhanced in your community?
  - d. What aspects of your communities would you like to transform? Provide specific examples and suggestions as to how you can begin to change your community. Save this list for *Lesson Nine* when students will need to pick a topic for their health and social advocacy projects.



Q&A

# Who Do You See?



