

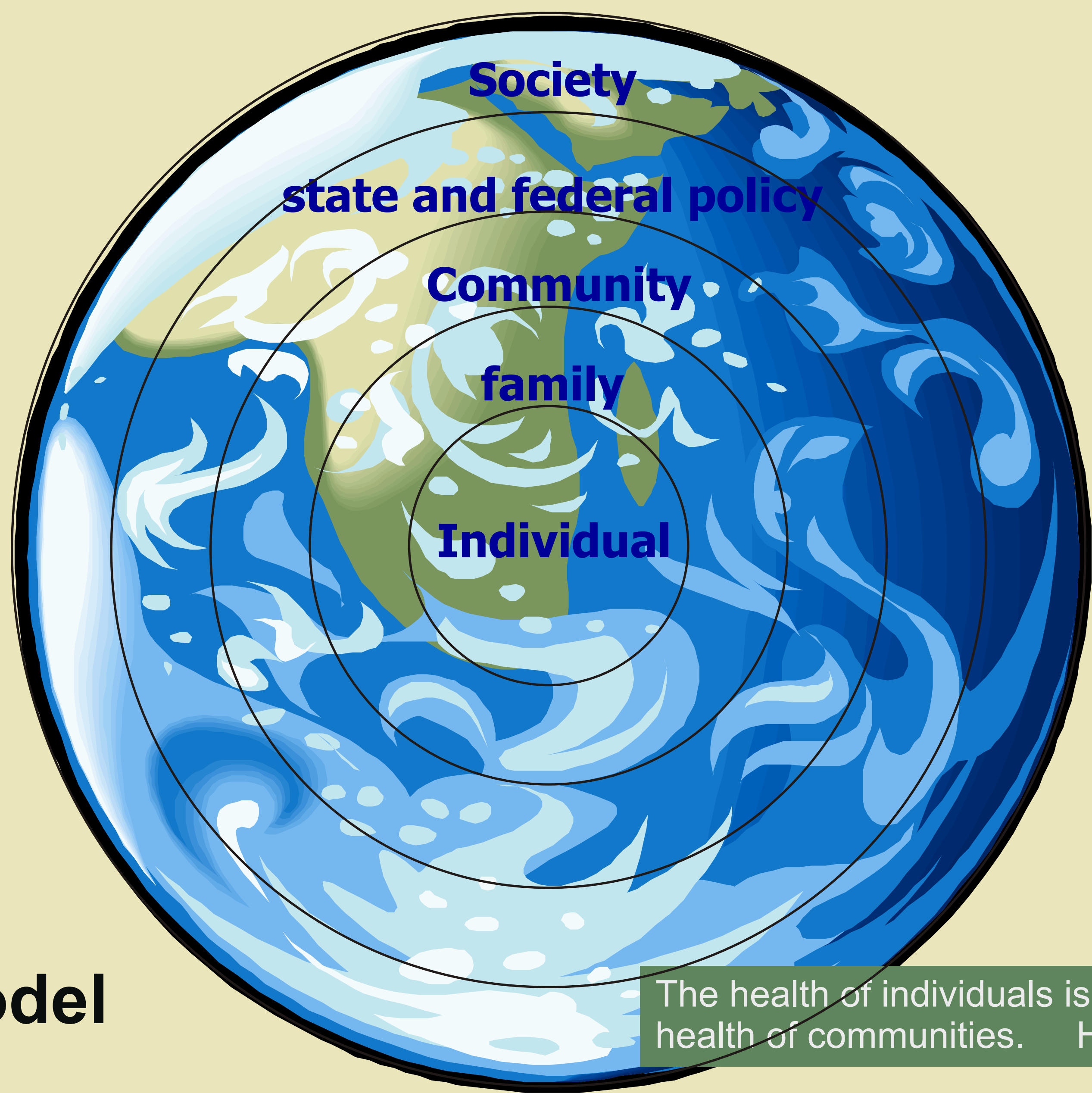
Of Systems and Sanctuaries: Deconstructing the ‘Silos’ Metaphor in Public Health Discourse

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Objective

Recent public health discourse applies the metaphor of ‘silo’ as a non-institutionalized “code” to disparage disease-specific frameworks, suggesting these represent fragmented, outdated approaches to public health. Employing the ‘silo’ metaphor as shorthand for ‘isolation’ and ‘fragmentation,’ public health discourse fails to examine its communication language about health protection and disease prevention in the deeper context of communities, prevention and social justice — key constructs of public health. There is no argument that holistic, ecological approaches to public health issues are the most relevant ways to promote health in communities. In fact, approaches that acknowledge the connectivity needed to address community problems are often consistent with the values of communities most heavily burdened by diabetes in these times.



Ecologic Model

Methods

Ethnographic discourse in rural communities provided ‘stories from the heartland’ about the integral nature of silos in community. "Windshield observation" demonstrated visually the connectedness of silos to fields, harvest, and storage and transportation vessels, forming a labyrinth of effective food storage and distribution systems. Dialogue with diabetes prevention champions in health disparate communities revealed the ecological roots of diabetes due to forced changes in land use, traditional ‘food-ways,’ and political history. For many, silos stand as long-standing sentinels both in landscape and memory, icons of prevention and preparedness.



Results

Silos originated from Native American corn cellars. They changed in style over time but yet remain the essential structures they always were on working farms. Silos are integral to community systems’ economy, health, and long-sighted preparation for the future. ‘Silo’ as metaphor can be expanded beyond its current dismissive application to the contextual, deeply rooted, prevention-oriented indigenous wisdom and stories needed in these times of modernization.



Conclusion

In contrast to its current a-contextual use as a negative metaphor, silos can be viewed more positively as a symbol of a public health framework that respects embedded ecological systems of community knowledge. Inclusive, respectful, participatory approaches can align shared values of traditional knowledge and modern health protection strategies.

Learning Objective

To describe a framework for a ‘grounded,’ community relevant, integrated public health approach to diabetes, obesity, and health inequities, acknowledging ‘silos’ as a positive metaphor for traditional wisdom needed in these times of modernization.

Key words

silo, metaphor, type 2 diabetes, health inequities, community knowledge, ecology, systems