

A Value Framework for Community Psychology

Erika Sanborne, 2002

INTRODUCTION

“Community Psychology concerns the relationships of the individual to communities and society. Through collaborative research and action, community psychologists seek to understand and to enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and society” (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001, p. 5). The work of community psychology is best understood in terms of the complementary core values that guide our reactions to, and interactions with others. To understand the possible roles of a community psychologist is to understand the underlying principles that govern how we approach a situation. The following is a discussion of key concepts integral to community psychology perspective. It is hoped that in reading the overview, the reader will gain an appreciation for the field of community psychology and for the valuable roles a community psychologist might play in our world.

PREVENTION

Rather than just reacting to a problem or issue and finding means with which to treat it, the ideal approach would be to identify ways to minimize or prevent the problem from ever occurring. To do this we look at precipitating factors and hope to intervene in meaningful ways that change environmental and/or personal factors, and that remove barriers to success and wellness, before disorder develops. A popular metaphor is used to help visualize how prevention looks in process:

Two men are walking along the river. One spots a drowning person floating by. The walker jumps in and grabs the drowning person and he pulls him safely from the water. Before catching his breath he sees that his friend has jumped in to save another drowning person. The flow of drowning people continues and increases and the two men continue pulling them out of the water, tiring as they near exhaustion. And drowning people keep passing by too, as they can only rescue a few of them because there are more drowning people than walkers. Suddenly one of the men stops the rescue effort and takes off running up the river. His friend does not understand why he's seemingly abandoning these drowning people. Little does he know the one who went upstream is going to find out why all of these drowning people have been falling into the river!

Individual illness and community disarray will always require treatment and reactionary responses, but the community psychologist strives to prevent some of it. Prevention also lessens the demand for treatment thereby freeing up access to such resources for those who may otherwise not have access.

CHANGE

Applications of community psychology are derived from a philosophy of change, based on the community psychologist being actively involved in community processes while seeking to understand them. The opposite of this would look like an outside expert peering through a window to the community inside, assessing from outside to guide interventions for within. Community psychology interventions are aptly placed in the community in non-clinical settings. With prevention as a focus, the community psychologist aims to effect social change in a broad context, while participating in the community itself and conceptualizing change and collaboration with other community members, who ultimately own the process of change anyway.

INDIGENOUS RESOURCES

It would be wheel-reinvention to overlook what exists in a community already as a resource. It is important to value and to collaborate with the expertise within a community. This focus on strengths and competency building helps shift the focus away from pathology. The question asked: What is already here, and why does it work?

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Community members themselves are the true experts of their own situation. It's absurd to think otherwise. Therefore community psychologists welcome and desire citizen participation in design, implementation, and evaluation of any community intervention. Recognizing the expertise and practical understanding of community members will inform the community psychologist and she partners with those in the community to effect meaningful change.

SHARING POWER

Community psychologists aim to effect social change in broad contexts, ideally as prevention. This is a goal best reached by collaborating with others, utilizing existing resources in the community, and involving citizen participation in every aspect of program design, implementation, and evaluation. This is a shift in perspective for many people, particularly because the goals of community psychology can only be reached by sharing power, by removing the us-vs-them mentality, by eliminating the status differential between "experts" and "those served by experts," and by involving all members of a community, including those who may be otherwise oppressed. In genuinely recognizing the community members as the true experts on their situation, the community interventions that result will be based on needs identified by community members themselves, structured by their participation, and evaluated by their perception of change. Sharing power lends itself well to sustainability of programs. Not sharing power lends itself to misguided interventions, not informed by the community and not focused on needs important to community members. Therefore not sharing power in a community process will not likely be sustainable, effective, or even ethical.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Community psychologists' focus on the rights to which all persons are entitled uses the privilege afforded them to effect change towards a more equitable allocation of resources, especially for those who may be marginalized. More equal access to resources, involves all community members in the systems surrounding their lives. More equal access increases citizens participation (all should be free to participate), and citizen participation makes for a community that is likely empowered to improve the quality of life. Privilege is a special advantage, immunity, permission, right or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual, class or cast. Privilege in effect is a social resource, and community members have varying amounts of it. Coping is how we use the resources available to us to deal with stressors. Therefore a person's ability to cope with stressors of any kind is in part a function of one's social privilege in a given context. It is important to keep this in mind when making decisions that affect the lives of others.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Many psychologists believe that a defining problem in Western society is the alienation and loneliness that comes with the individualism that is so highlighted in our way of life. The antidote is a strengthened sense of community. Sense of community is a powerful and emotional force that increases quality of life; it is critical to both our individual and collective well-being. This is important in a time when too often we are separated by our diversity rather than improved because of it. Sense of community includes essential qualities: membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. It is a fact that members participate in various communities in part because their needs are met therein; their needs are met through connecting with other members. Members are also attracted to communities in which they feel influential, share commonly held ideals that can be pursued through involvement in the community, and experience a sense of belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Community psychologists sometimes strive to foster a sense of community in a group, recognizing the benefits to community members in making the experience more enriching and supportive.

LEVEL OF ANALYSIS

Oftentimes multiple processes at multiple levels contribute to a problem or make it more likely in a given situation. Therefore, many studies and interventions in community psychology concern more than one level of analysis. Individuals exist in Microsystems of families, workgroups, and others. Individuals interact with their surrounding Microsystems and each influences the other. Sometimes a workgroup's norms influence an individual's behavior. Sometimes an individual will bring a new perspective to a workgroup and the communication patterns might change. Beyond Microsystems are increasingly more broad shells of context up to and including the encapsulating level of society itself. Similarly, each level of analysis can influence the other levels and individuals. The following metaphor can be useful to illustrate the mutual influence of the multiple levels.

Imagine a child's intricate mobile hanging in a room. Many pieces are suspended in apparent balance on delicate strings, attaching the lower pieces to little bars attached by strings to the main base. The pieces do not touch one another, the air in the room is calm, and the mobile is a snapshot of stillness. And then enters a slight breeze touching just the edge of one suspended piece. Suddenly the balance is offset, the piece tips in response to the motion of the air. The piece is one of a few attached to the small bar above them which now moves, tipping the main structure and influencing every other piece of the system, if even slightly. Back and forth pieces at different levels and sides compensate and strive to regain a balance like the snapshot image, standing by for the next breeze, forever changed by the experience of the last one.

Taking multiple levels of factors into account for both understanding communities and planning for intervention is essential to understand and to plan for how any one person or group operates in larger systems and society, and how each influences the others. The community perspective is marked by an insistence on multiple levels of analysis.

RADIATING EFFECTS

Just as a stimulus to one piece on a mobile affects many others directly or indirectly, thinking of effecting change in social settings requires consideration of the direct or indirect results that may ensue, often unintended. Sometimes there are beneficial radiating effects. An intervention designed to discourage maladaptive behavior in adolescents by offering midnight basketball could have many potential radiating effects, unrelated to intent. Maybe fewer adolescents involved will drop out of school. Maybe their relationships with parents will be different. Maybe people who sell drugs will find this gathering as an unexpected opening to sell drugs to these adolescents. Maybe school coaches will feel threatened by a successful night program and will treat these adolescents differently in the school setting. Maybe local policy will somehow change. Maybe anything - the key is to think through the possible radiating effects at multiple levels and to best ensure that the mobile isn't knocked down to the floor as an unintended outcome of a well-intentioned plan for action.

EMPIRICAL GROUNDING

Community psychologists hope to define/understand/address community issues in ways that can be studied in research. Research findings are then used both to theorize and to inform future community action. Communities are groups of real people and it would be unethical to impact these intricate systems without a sound theory, based on structured empirical findings, informed by the community of concern, and guided by the values essential to effective community psychology work.

References

Dalton, J. H., Elias, M. J., & Wandersman, A. (2001). *Community psychology: Linking individuals*

and communities. Stamford, CT: Wadsworth.

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14, 6-23.