



Learning Community Psychology Practice Competencies:

Student Pathways through the Applied Community Psychology Specialization

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Learning Community Psychology Practice Competencies (CPPCs): Student Pathways through the Applied Community Psychology Specialization

Abstract

Community psychology practice competencies provide a framework of skills students can learn to promote social change processes in communities. However, there is great overlap and cross-over of skill sets among some competencies. The complex nature of learning any competency will likely take multiple learning experiences to master and span years beyond a student's exit from training to achieve expertise. Programs training students in practice competencies can benefit from working collaboratively with students to better understand how students develop experience and skill in utilizing competencies across the curriculum. This article explores five narrative accounts of how students and graduates learned selected community psychology practice competencies through their training in the Applied Community Psychology (ACP) specialization at Antioch University Los Angeles. Students and graduates were asked to select a competency and write a two-page narrative of how they learned the competency through their training in the ACP specialization. Implications for academic program development and training in community psychology practice competencies are discussed.

The Applied Community Psychology Specialization¹ (ACP) is a 17-unit degree option within the Masters Programs in Psychology at Antioch University Los Angeles. The majority of students in ACP are pursuing a Master's in Clinical Psychology in preparation for licensure as marriage and family therapists, while students in the non-clinical degree options are planning careers in the non-profit sector or plan to pursue doctoral education in the future. A course, *Community Psychology: Theories and Methods*, serves as a prerequisite course to all core specialization courses. The core ACP curriculum consists of four core courses (*Community Consultation and Collaboration, Program Development and Evaluation, Prevention and Promotion, Psychoeducational Groups and In-Service Training Development*)

and *Field Study in Applied Community Psychology*. Students round out the specialization with electives that include courses in grant writing, asset-based community development, social justice advocacy, coalition building, empowerment and community practice, to name a few.

In the Community Consultation and Collaboration, Program Development and Evaluation, and, Prevention and Promotion courses students work in collaborative teams on projects in partnership with community-based organizations (non-profits, public schools, or city/county government). For each of these courses student teams serve as consultants to the organizations, working on a project identified by the organization as an area for further development and/or external input. These projects are closely supervised by program faculty who guide students through the process of developing a technical report for the organization to also be shared in class with peers. In the Psychoeducational

¹ 2010 Outstanding Program Award, Society for Community Research and Action (American Psychological Association Division 27) Council of Education Programs.

Groups and In-Service Training Development course students work independently with a community organization to develop psychoeducational workshops for their clientele or in-service trainings for program staff. In this course students develop workshop content and resource material for participants. Field study in Applied Community Psychology often emerges from one of the projects in the core courses. For example, students might work with an organization to implement recommendations from a consultation, or finalize and deliver a psychoeducational program to an organization.

The emergence of community psychology practice competencies (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012) has provided training programs with an opportunity to become: (1) transparent about the skills students can expect to learn through specifying which of 18 practice competencies are offered; and, (2) specific to the depth of mastery students can expect to gain in practice competencies by articulating the levels of training – Exposure, Experience and Expertise (Kloos, 2010) for each that are offered. For more information about the utilization of community psychology practice competencies (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012) in the ACP specialization, see Taylor & Sarkisian (2011), Sarkisian & Taylor (2013), and Sarkisian, G. V., Saleem, M. A., Simpkin, J., Weidenbacher, A., Bartko, N., & Taylor, S. (2013).

Because the ACP specialization is designed so that students gain a training level of *Experience*, i.e., supervised practice (Kloos, 2010), through multiple courses that include a fieldwork component, we were interested in learning about what students' journeys look like over time. Previously, faculty and students in the ACP specialization have utilized curriculum mapping with selected community psychology practice competencies learned in one course (Sarkisian, et al., 2013) but have not investigated learning competencies across

the ACP curriculum. This article explores five narrative accounts of learning a practice competency across the ACP specialization. Two students nearing completion of ACP specialization coursework, two students nearing graduation, and one graduate of seven years all chose a practice competency and described how they learned the competency through the specialization in a two-page narrative. The purpose of this paper is to share student accounts of learning practice competencies through the ACP specialization and identify implications for academic program development and training in practice competencies. Narratives are presented in order of tenure in the ACP specialization.

Prevention, A Novel Concept: Huda Bayaa

While all of the concepts of community psychology are pertinent and critical components, for me, concepts around prevention and promotion offered the foundational basis on which to connect all of the other building blocks of community psychology into my work. Working in community mental health, one sees the existence of cycles of violence, poverty and addiction that pervade many of the communities being served. Often, interventions are occurring after the proliferation of these issues, rather than before. What I learned in Prevention and Promotion trained me to be able to identify some of the stressors and modes of exploitation the community I serve may be exposed to and weigh that against the prevalence of social supports, confidence and coping capacity to better ascertain the likelihood that maladaptive behaviors may develop. Mental health tends to be a reactive practice in response to existing malady; prevention and promotion offers me the opportunity to conceptualize things from a position of empowerment rather than containment.

Prevention and promotion motivate the work around my desire to inform the Arab and Muslim communities of the vital importance of mental health, especially as an influx of refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced unspeakable atrocities arrive looking for the opportunity at a new life. With community psychology concepts, and prevention and promotion specifically, gauging strengths and limitations that exist in a community help to formulate what direction my work can take to provide the most fruitful and positive influence. One of the ways I can do this with the refugee and asylum populations is by assessing what sorts of social supports that they may have on arrival, consider the trauma or experiences they may have, and the linguistic, social, and job skills they hold. These factors, among others, can help guide the development of programs and policies that will make adjustment to life in the United States easier and more successful.

When interviewing for traineeships, community psychology concepts played a key part in helping me secure an AmeriCorps trainee position doing the work I aimed to do. During that interview, I talked about my desire to create programs and workshops aimed at fostering greater understanding of what mental health and illness look like, but also at increasing social support and a greater sense of community. Identifying and creating support systems and uplifting the individual to foster resilience have all been key pillars in the work I do. As we prepare to receive more refugees in the United States, the urgency in creating a plan to help safeguard against unnecessary strife and distress that communities may face becomes more imperative. Making refugees' transition into the United States as seamless as possible is a main priority of mine. There is a recognition of how distress can create barriers to their integration and to the community they resettle in. Rather than wait for these issues to arise, I can begin to assess what potential

stressors and social oppression they may face while I consider how to increase their self-esteem and coping skills through community support and psychoeducation.

Today, I am creating psychoeducational workshops utilizing prevention and promotion concepts along with the knowledge and experience I gained in other ACP courses to make a lasting impact in the Arab and Muslim communities. The organization I work for recognizes the skills I have acquired in ACP as valuable and has provided me with the support and leeway to develop programs and opportunities as a result. ACP has given me not only the tools and experience, but also the confidence to go into my community and believe that I can be an agent of change. Further, an emphasis on concepts of prevention and promotion has taken me out of the standard reactionary practice to a more proactive interventionist mindset. That is something I feel will be an invaluable resource for me and the communities I serve.

Prevention and Health Promotion: Rachel Fusco

After nine years directing youth leadership programs in the nonprofit sector, I knew that prevention and promotion guided my work. I returned to school to study family structures, recognizing that working with teens in isolation does little if you cannot also engage their families. After discovering ACP, I knew there was no other specialization for me.

In Prevention and Promotion, I consulted with a small nonprofit dedicated to promoting literacy through after-school partnerships with public elementary schools in Los Angeles. I had previously volunteered as an "after-school reader." As a volunteer with a background in program management, I was impressed with how successfully they ran their program with a bare-bones staff and a large volunteer base. I reached out to the Director who was happy to have free

consultation work in exchange for a minimal amount of time on his end. During the consultation, my group observed an organizational structure that was a model of successful volunteer recruitment and retention. Their processes and outcomes were entirely based on their volunteers. This worked well because the volunteers who were willing to lead were passionate about the organization, had expertise and free time, or wanted to grow new areas of expertise. Despite the organization's success, viewing the organization through theories of empowerment and sustainability left considerable room for improvement.

My group reviewed research from a variety of disciplines and identified recommendations that would promote organizational capacity building. For example, the organization was diligent about keeping records but their volunteer staff prioritized scheduling the next reading events over analyzing the records, leaving the records untouched. Additionally, despite the organization's high rates of volunteer retention, they had limited resources, including staff to train, supervise quality, and ensure program success. Lastly, while this organization received donations and secured grants in order to donate books to every child, family, and school they worked with, books were often sent home in English to families who spoke Spanish at home. Through our analysis, we realized that, while doing meaningful literacy work and philanthropy, this nonprofit perpetuated cycles of dependency. In our analysis report, my group identified structures and processes that would foster community empowerment and organizational sustainability.

Our experience was unique in finding an organization so willing to (1) share information and data to inform the creation of relevant recommendations and (2) implement the recommendations. Within three weeks of sharing the report, the Director informed us that our report helped convince the Board of Directors to recruit a

second full-time staff person. While we recommended that any new staff members should be fluent in Spanish, this was not posted in the job description. Perhaps the nonprofit hired with that in mind, but we cannot know. Nevertheless, our consultee reviewed our report and opted to implement our organizational capacity-building suggestions while community empowerment did not become an explicit priority. In my professional career and ACP consultation opportunities, I have observed countless organizations focus on tasks and functionality at the expense of empowerment. Yet, at the core of empowerment, community members shift from service recipients, or consumers, to valued contributors, or assets. After four consultation projects, ACP has helped me connect my passions with my own assets while equipping me with valuable theories and practices to engage in truly transformative community work.

Collaboration: Angela Doss

Perhaps the feature of the ACP courses that, for me, most palpably sets them apart from other courses in my degree program was their emphasis on, and expectation for, project collaboration – both inside and outside the classroom. Collaboration is so intimate a part of the coursework, in fact, I found it equally as necessary to my learning about community psychology as the foundational ecological principles themselves. Most relevant to my learning about the importance of collaboration were my experiences performing collaborative research-based work on issues of access to healthy foods (*Community Psychology: Theories and Methods*) performing collaborative consultation field work – for both a non-violent parenting agency (*Community Consultation and Collaboration*) and a non-profit agency advocating for child caregivers of adults (*Program Development and Evaluation*).

The collaborative research required in the *Theories* course meant that my group partners and I applied the basic ecological principles of community psychology theory directly to real-world issues and contexts. Our research topic, which focused on rights and access to healthy foods, brought these principles to life in terms that felt especially meaningful to me. First, being able to select a topic that was personally relevant (as a type 1 diabetic already beginning to self-educate on how the intersectionality of food, environment and economy impacts overall well-being) was most beneficial to my learning. Furthermore, having had both supportive and challenging perspectives of the other members of my research team meant that we were able to assist one another in achieving not only fair and thorough research, but also a more coherent, refined understanding of these foundational principles.

In the latter two most relevant courses, it was the collaborative nature of the field work itself, culminating in the preparation and refinement of technical reports submitted and presented directly to agency leaders at project's end that proved most valuable to my learning. The opportunity to consult directly with agency decision-makers and community members allowed me to gain insight on their perspectives, understand their needs in their language and from within their environment, observe how they adapt to ever-shifting and often limited resources, and grasp how intricately bound up those adaptations and resources are with various events across the three levels of analysis (i.e., micro, meso & macro) – while also collaborating with fellow students on my consulting team, was indispensable to my learning about the ecological principles of adaptation, interdependence and cycling of resources. Drawing on ongoing exchanges with agency leaders, our team conceptualized and drafted an organizational empowerment genogram and a program impact logic model, including

graphic images and flow charts detailing multi-level organizational relationships, programs, resource applications and intended outcomes. This real-world experience of collaboration allowed the refinement of ideas within and among the consultation team and provided the invaluable opportunity for feedback directly from organizational leadership.

My community-based collaborative learning continues today as a Counselor in Residence and Group Facilitator working under supervision at The Relational Center in Los Angeles. I have selected an agency that is committed to promoting the foundational principles of community psychology toward social change, with particular emphasis on themes of collaboration (over competition and consumerism) and interdependence and community (over individualism and social isolation). My experience at this agency has been one of profound growth, support and shared leadership, as I collaborate with supervisors, fellow counselors, and community volunteers to create original psychoeducational group curriculum, peer trainings, and community organizing initiatives based on community psychology's foundational ecological principles. I have also been challenging the dominant narratives that perpetuate cultural empathy deficits and social isolation. Through collaboration, we are working to build bridges and strengthen bonds within and across our local communities.

Community and Social Change: Claire Cahen

In my first course on Community Psychology, I was introduced to the ecological principle of cycling of resources. Students in the class were divided into groups and asked to study a local social issue through the lens of community psychology; one of our tasks was to identify the ebb and flow of resources in the community/ organization we were researching. My group looked into the

displacement of Skid Row residents in downtown Los Angeles. We noted quickly that, though financial capital was scarce in the indigent district, informal resources abounded. For instance, the city of Los Angeles had somewhat controversially declined to bring trash cans, bathrooms, and street sweeping services to Skid Row, causing a sanitation crisis so hazardous that the United Nations called the calamity a human rights violation (LACAN & Dahmann, 2010; LACAN, 2013). Skid Row residents took matters into their own hands. They set up an unofficial cleaning group that dispatched teams with brooms and trash bags daily (LACAN, 2013). That image stayed with me. Undeterred by lack of infrastructural support, Skid Row residents had drawn on their own resources to refuse to live in a dump.

Not until I took a workshop on asset-based community development did I begin to focus more systematically on informal resources and leaders. This workshop permanently altered the way I thought about community organizing, prompting me to unlearn “the needs perspective” I had always relied on (Greens & Haines, 2016). I learned first from my professor’s accounts of communities long defined in terms of what they lacked: Skid Row—the area with the densest population of homeless people in the country—was a good example. Many of the articles I had read on the topic highlighted the resources that were absent from the neighborhood: bathrooms and trash cans, but also living-wage jobs and permanent affordable housing. Few had drawn attention to the resiliency and ingenuity of residents who spearheaded projects like the neighborhood cleanup. The narrative of a community in need veiled what Skid Row residents had to offer and, in the process, veiled their humanity, therefore legitimizing their neglect.

I was convinced that focusing on needs was no longer the right model for the community organizing work I hoped to undertake an applied asset-based community development

and informal resources in all my subsequent fieldwork. For example, I facilitated an asset-mapping exercise with the director of a program that promoted active transportation in a low-income neighborhood of color. The program recruited parents and senior citizens to serve as crossing guards and corner captains around a local school and also held regular parent assemblies to discuss safer driving practices. The organization’s work seemed ripe for the asset-based model, which could help residents further identify the gifts already available to them, rather than simply relying on formal governing structures to implement infrastructure improvements, like crosswalks and stoplights. It took both myself and the program director a few walks around the school to retrain ourselves to look for assets, as we had previously been focused on resources that were missing. We pinpointed an empty lot where we could place more bicycle racks, parks where we could hold outdoor lunches and classes, and recruited teachers who were willing to integrate courses about the neighborhood’s history into their curriculum.

This asset mapping project morphed into a master’s document and ultimately laid the foundation for one of the most significant competencies I have gained as a community psychologist in training: looking for resources within otherwise overlooked settings. In all of my research, so-called “informal leaders and organizations” offered a wealth of knowledge on their communities and an even greater repertoire of solutions to social issues. As a community psychologist in training, I am uniquely positioned to support such organizations and people; and can make sure their work is known and funded. I am able to carry out my research in a way that builds on community member strength and innovation, rather than lack and need.

Empowerment: Rebecca Gordon

I chose the ACP specialization because I was interested in working with communities, and

the core value of community psychology – to promote wellbeing – resonated with my own. The program encompassed all 18 community psychology practice competencies, but for this essay I will focus on how I gained competency in empowerment.

I clearly remember being exposed to empowerment theory in my first quarter during a class which surveyed the theory and methods used in community psychology. I remember reading seminal articles by Zimmerman (1995), Gaventa (1980), and Rappaport (1987), and being entranced. It made sense to examine power, because disempowerment seemed to be at the root of so many social ills.

Towards the end of the ACP program in the Community Consultation and Collaboration course, my classmate and I decided to consult with a large international resettlement agency that was having difficulty resettling Iraqi refugees. We decided to conduct the consultation using empowerment theory because much of what our initial research revealed had to do with disempowerment. We designed the intervention to address power at each ecological level through a psychoeducational model we learned in a previous course.

For the field study in ACP, my classmate and I decided to write a paper on the intervention we developed for the refugee resettlement organization and submit it to the Journal of Muslim Mental Health. Our professor, Gregor Sarkisian, joined as the third author – helping to mentor us through the process. I was able to further critically reflect on the application of empowerment theory during the process of working with my co-authors to prepare our manuscript for the peer review process.

I graduated in the summer of 2009, and in the fall of that year our paper was accepted for publication (Gordon, Taylor, Sarkisian, 2010). In the spring of 2010 my co-author and I

presented the paper at the Society for Community Research and Action meeting at the Eastern Psychological Association conference. I gained further competency in empowerment theory by presenting our intervention to academics and community psychology practitioners, and being able to hear and reflect on their feedback.

Currently, I am an experience researcher working for a large technology company. My role is to conduct research that helps my clients better understand the context, workflow, pain points, and needs of their current and future users in order to inform product strategy and development. In my work, I have espoused using empowerment theory to inform designing and evaluating digital experiences, which is a novel application of the theory. I presented on this topic at the tech conference South by Southwest (SXSW), which took place in Austin Texas in 2016 (Gordon, 2016).

At each step of the way through the ACP program I was able to gain competency in the foundational principles, and empowerment theory specifically. Each activity within the ACP program allowed me to build on my knowledge of empowerment enough to move to the next level of learning. I was able to move from understanding empowerment theory, to applying it, writing about it for publication, presenting it at a conference, and finally, utilizing it for a novel application.

Discussion

The narratives of ACP students and graduates share common themes yet their work in communities takes them on varied paths of learning, largely based on their interest in serving populations and programs for which they have a passion for making a difference. Almost all students and graduates in this paper experienced a paradigm shift in how they think about social problems – e.g., shifting from a needs- to assets-based perspective or shifting from reactionary to

proactive measures – typically occurring in the introductory course (*Community Psychology: Theories and Methods*). Another prevalent theme is that learning the practice competency was largely grounded in multiple collaborations with community partners and peers (students) through fieldwork. Finally, participants acknowledged that they are confident in what they have learned but are still learning and developing their skills related to the competency.

Implications for Academic Program Development and Training in Community Psychology Practice Competencies

The narratives presented in this paper raise an interesting question for the future development of academic programs teaching practice competencies:

How does one evaluate learning practice competencies when the process is largely based in the context of fieldwork with different groups, purposes, and timelines?

This is likely a question that each program will need to ask and answer on its own.

Given the unique training context of the ACP specialization, discussion has begun about ways in which the ACP specialization can provide meaningful feedback on the process of learning competencies through a student's tenure. While we have been collecting data on outcomes through student portfolios completed in their last quarter, we have not been collecting evaluative data on the *process* of learning practice competencies. Below, we describe four strategies that are being implemented or in consideration of being implemented in the near future to provide students with feedback on gaining experience with practice competencies.

Evaluation by individual instructor for a course.

This is perhaps the most traditional strategy where the instructor uses criteria in the form of academic program and course outcomes to

develop assignments that meet the course outcomes. Ideally, practice competencies or content closely related to competencies are included in course objectives or outcomes. In the ACP specialization, this includes delivering new material related to competencies, mentoring students in writing technical reports, supervising students' fieldwork in class, and engaging in discussions and other written assignments to assess learning. Through a student's behavior in class, their writing, and other interactions, instructors evaluate student learning in a 10 or 15-week period of time.

Self and peer evaluation of collaborative skill development.

Because students work in groups in three of the four ACP core courses, ACP faculty have considered developing a measure of collaboration that we would have students use during the process of learning to receive feedback from group partners as well as at the end of the course. The idea is to provide students with periodic feedback about how their collaborative efforts are being perceived by colleagues so that they can use feedback mid course to improve their effectiveness. Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, and Allen (2001) have provided an excellent framework of criteria from which to develop such a measure of collaborative capacity among students. In courses where students work in collaborative groups or in consultation teams, such a measure could be administered periodically through an academic term to group members who can rate themselves as well as student colleagues and provide a summative rating at the end of the term to count as part of a student's grade for participation in the course.

Site evaluation by community partners.

In fieldwork and courses that include fieldwork, obtaining feedback from community partners working directly with students can provide a real-world

perspective, especially to those students wishing to work as consultants. Through developing an evaluation form to be completed by community partners, students can receive feedback from their community partners (i.e., potential employers) on both their skills during a consultation process as well as the usefulness of their final deliverables – e.g., technical reports, presentations, etc. Angelique (2001) developed an internship site training form including goal attainment and general skills that could be adapted to a program's specific needs in terms of feedback from community partners that would benefit their students in training.

Periodic feedback by the training program on skill development in Practice Competencies.

Ideally, students would be able to receive feedback from multiple sources and training experiences as they proceed through a program. If the focus of learning is on students' development of experience and expertise in CPPCs, and, we have strong anecdotal evidence that it takes years to develop a level of expertise in any practice competency, it makes sense to view the evaluation of students learning competencies with a longitudinal perspective. While this would likely not occur for every competency offered or in every course, it could be beneficial for training programs to develop evaluation methods that capture student development of knowledge and skill in selected practice competencies over the full length of the training program. This might include providing students with feedback outside of courses (e.g., every 1-2 terms) on the practice competencies that are a driving force or main focus of the program. For example, in the ACP specialization, collaboration is a necessary process of every course providing a rationale to develop a measure based on collaborative capacity (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2001) that could be implemented in each course and reviewed

with students periodically to further develop collaboration skills.

Conclusion

This paper explores the complex nature of learning community psychology practice competencies. To illustrate the process of learning practice competencies, five narrative accounts of learning one competency are presented by students and graduates of the Applied Community Psychology specialization at Antioch University Los Angeles. Common themes across learning competencies included pursuit of professional passion, engaging in paradigm shifts in problem conceptualization (from deficit to asset-based), the benefit of multiple field experiences, and the emergence of confidence through multiple field experiences. Due to the context-specific nature of field work in learning practice competencies, multiple sources of evaluating how students learn community psychology practice competencies are recommended: course evaluation; self and peer evaluation of collaborative skill development; site evaluation of student work by community partners; and, periodic program feedback on skill development in selected competencies.

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