



## Just What Community Psychologists Would Do: A Commentary on the Special issues

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### Abstract

The papers in these two *Global Journal* special issues focus on the 18 Community Psychology Practice Competencies proposed by the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) in 2012. In this commentary, I articulate some of my enjoyment in reading the articles in these special issues, share some thoughts on the history of the practice competencies, and propose some ideas for conversations that may be useful in their development over time.

The SCRA practice competencies have been useful in opening conversations about how to articulate what community psychologists can do in working with community members, and about how to provide educational practices to prepare students for that work. These special issues build on the volume on community psychology practice edited by Scott and Wolfe (2015) and the earlier *Global Journal* special issue on international competencies (Wolfe, Scott, & Jimenez, 2013). The practice competencies can be useful only if we consider them to be inevitably incomplete descriptions of community psychology practices – practices that are inherently dynamic, contextual, and value-laden. They can be useful only if we continually re-examine and revise them, and adapt them as needed for work in specific contexts.

“Just what community psychologists would do.” That was often my thought as I read the papers to be published in these special issues of the *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*. What I mean is that these papers, despite differences in context, aims, and tone, struck me as exemplifying the distinctive strengths, values and practices of our field. Not that everyone pursued their work in identical ways, but that everyone responded to the contexts of their work in a way that seemed to me to embody some essence of our field. Whether that work occurred in

community settings with students, in planning and implementing curriculum changes, in comparing differing conceptions of practice competencies, or when articulating vigorous disagreement with the whole idea of the SCRA competencies, the authors wrote from a point of view that typifies community psychology values. Those multiple essences of community psychology are difficult to define succinctly, and perhaps go beyond words, but after you read these papers, ask yourself if you feel as I do.

I felt this most vividly when I read papers that most evocatively presented participatory work with community members and students, often including students' or graduates' voices – especially the papers by Dawn X. Henderson et. al., Victoria Scott, Tabitha Underwood, Regina Day Langhout et al., Kelly Collins et al., and Huda Bayaa et al. I also felt it when I read about opportunities for graduate students to learn practice skills in community settings, in planful and supervised ways, and in ways related to the foundational values of our field – especially the papers by Bernadette Sanchez et al., Gabe Kuperminc et al., Greg Meissen et al., Gregor Sarkisian and Sylvie Taylor, Nuria Ciofalo et al. and Daniel Clifford et al. The extension of the competencies approach to community psychology research (Victoria Faust et al.) immersed me again in the research side of our identity. The practice competencies also fit well with the work of three community health coalitions in the paper by Jonathan Scaccia et al. The value of multidisciplinary and international perspectives emerged in papers that compared the SCRA competencies to other systems of defining competencies or credentials for practice, in Italy, Canada, Australia, Spain, Britain, and Europe generally, and in social work and public health in the U.S. (in papers by Susan Wolfe and Anne Webb Price, Donata Francescato and Bruna Zani, Isidro Maya Jariego, and Jacqui Akhurst et al.). And I experienced one key essence of our field when reading papers critical of the SCRA competencies or their breadth of application (by Jacqui Akhurst et al.), or that suggested the need for amendments, extensions, additions or revisions, in papers by Wolfe and Price, Kuperminc et al., Francescato and Zani, Faust et al., and Langhout et al.

### **Historical Notes about Practice Competencies**

A note is in order here about the historical development of the SCRA competencies, and my limited role in that. The published history,

especially surveys of students and practitioners, is covered well in articles by Gabe Kuperminc et al. and by Susan Wolfe and Anne Price, and others, in these special issues. I will give a personal account as I remember it. What is now the SCRA Practice Council originated the idea of practice competencies, the original draft of the competencies, and the related SCRA Value Proposition. It was avowedly *not* an effort to move toward accreditation of academic programs or licensure of individuals in community psychology. That had been firmly denied by the Division of Community Psychology (now SCRA) in the 1980's, and there has been no change in that position within SCRA. What the practice competencies were intended to do was to articulate the skills and approach of community psychologists (plural) in working with communities, organizations and policy-makers. We hoped and intended that this would have two salutary effects: (a) to build the visibility of our field in society and in the employment market for graduates of our programs; and (b) to strengthen the ties between graduate education and the practice of community psychology. We did not claim that our field has a monopoly on these competencies. As Wolfe and Price point out in their article in these special issues, they overlap with the professions of social work and public health, and no doubt other fields. They also overlap with the skills of many community members and leaders, learned from lived experience.

Although I was not a part of the origination of the practice competencies, I became actively involved as chair of the SCRA Council for Educational Programs, which worked with the Practice Council to draft and re-draft a list of competencies and work for adoption of a final draft by the SCRA Executive Committee. That put me in the role of wordsmith and editor/keeper of the various revisions as they were agreed upon throughout the process of consulting with practitioners, students,

graduate programs, and finally the Executive Committee. One important outcome of this process was the delineation of the Foundational Principles at the beginning of the list. Another important outcome, especially advocated by Jack Tebes in Executive Committee, was developing a related set of competencies for community research; I am gratified to see this work presented in the article by Victoria Faust et al. in these special issues. The practice competencies document, as approved by the SCRA Executive Committee, was then published as a joint column of the Community Practitioner and the Education Connection columns in *The Community Psychologist* in 2012; Susan Wolfe and I edited those two columns at the time, so we are often cited in references to that publication. Two important parts of this history are the *Global Journal* special issue on international competencies edited by Susan Wolfe, Victoria Chien Scott, and Tiffany Jimenez (2013) and the volume edited by Victoria Scott and Susan Wolfe (2015), *Community Psychology: Foundations for Practice*.

There are a few things that, in looking back, perhaps I and others might have stated more clearly in our wordsmithing. These thoughts suggest possible revisions for the future in practice competencies conceptions and documents.

One is that these competencies are designed to be examined, re-examined, adapted as needed to local contexts, and revised in the future. They comprise an “open-systems” formative document, to be discussed and revised over time, as Collins et al. assert in their article in these special issues. (I wish I had thought of those terms back when we were wordsmithing drafts for SCRA.) I am certain that this assumption was there from the beginning, but we might have stated it more clearly and often. And I am very happy that many contributors to these special issues advocated additional competencies to consider, or described methods of adapting

competencies in context for students in graduate programs.

Second, these competencies, admittedly decontextualized as concepts in a list, must be adapted and used in contextual ways. Community psychology practice must be contextual and must also recognize how communities are dynamic and change over time. There will always be bridging to be done between our field’s foundational values and principles, the skills community psychologists use in our work, and the realities of community practice. The list of SCRA competencies cannot, by themselves, completely bridge that distance. That’s a good thing; that leaves us room to grow, understand, and develop our understandings of how best to partner and work with diverse community members in diverse contexts, and room to disagree and learn about how to do that. Again, I am certain that this assumption was there from the beginning, but we needed to be clearer about that.

Third, as we did emphasize, the definition of these competencies for the field as a whole does *not* mean that every community psychologist must have expertise or even experience in all of them. Moreover, graduate programs can choose which competencies they can best help their students develop, in their own contexts. I am happy to see, in several articles about graduate education in these special issues, discussions in graduate programs about what constitutes the emphases or “cornerstones” of their programs, while at the same time making very useful efforts to help students make empowering choices about their own skill development, choosing from the entire list of competencies.

It is gratifying, in several articles, to read about uses of the practice competencies and value proposition in graduate program curricula and practice. It is especially gratifying to see that those efforts involve student voices and community partners.

Before I close these historical notes, I want to recognize the importance of Jim Kelly for our discussions about competencies for practice, at least in the U.S. From the early days (Kelly, 1970, 1971) to recently (Kelly, 2010), Jim has advocated the importance of process, interpersonal skills, an ecological perspective, and what he called the “spirit” of community psychology. His manner as well as his writings embody these qualities. For me, discussions of community psychology practice and the processes of community work always bring Jim to mind.

### **Thoughts on the Future of Practice Competencies**

Here I share some of my reflections about future conversations and changes to be considered in the SCRA practice competencies. These are tentative suggestions, and I make them with a sense of my own status and limitations. I have retired from teaching, and I was solely a teacher of undergraduates, not engaged in graduate education of future community psychologists for practice. I am not currently involved in SCRA committees or councils, and my own level of community practice is limited to volunteer work with a team providing workshops for community agencies. I firmly think the future of the Practice Competencies concepts and practices should be determined by practitioners, by students and faculty in educational programs, in consultation with our community partners, and through SCRA (see the Kuperminc et al. and Meissen et al. articles in these special issues for some ways to involve community partners). With that said, while reading the articles in these special issues, I have formed some thoughts about issues for these constituencies to consider. Use them as you see fit.

#### *Public Policy*

First, I find it unfortunate that there was little attention in these papers to the competency of Public Policy Analysis, Development and Advocacy (see Table 1 of this commentary). I

am not sure why. Policy work is an area of long-standing and growing activity within SCRA. Not every graduate program or every community psychologist performs this work, but several leading community psychologists do, and sooner or later just about all of us engage in some kind of advocacy about policy at some level. It is an important activity with its own skills to learn. I hope further discussions of practice competencies involve community psychologists writing about policy work.

#### *Foundational Principles*

Second, I think we need to more clearly and firmly separate the Foundational Principles from the more skills-focused concepts that form the rest of the list. (Kuperminc et al. suggest something similar; I recommend reading their discussion of this.) The concept of Foundational Principles emerged during the process of discussion and re-drafting, and I think now that we did not firmly enough articulate that these are basic value-laden principles, not just skills. Perhaps SCRA should change the title of the list to Practice Principles and Competencies.

Doing this would also require dealing somehow with a double meaning embodied in the Foundational Principle of Sociocultural and Cross-Cultural Competence. To me, in retrospect, there are two concepts here. One is something like Valuing Human Diversity, a value principle with social and emotional aspects, regarding cultural and other differences within and between communities. Reflexivity and awareness of one’s own privilege, position, and limitations of perspective and experience would fit here, I think, although perhaps these should be included under Ethical, Reflective Practice or as an additional Foundational Principle. The other meaning is something like Social-Cultural Competence: interpersonal skills in understanding differences, genuine listening to diverse views, communicating clearly one’s own perspectives and limitations, and working respectfully and effectively with

diverse persons and communities. One can certainly privately value diversity but not possess strong skills in these areas related to working with diverse populations. My suggestion is that Valuing Human Diversity, or a similar term, be a foundational principle, as stated in many SCRA documents already. Social-Cultural Competence would then join a later category of skills in the practice competencies list. A related issue involves how we define diversity: perhaps human diversity, perhaps cultural diversity, perhaps some more inclusive term. To me, that term should include a recognition of the influence of social-structural forces, not just cultural ones.

Kuperminc et al. suggest a further distinction, between core and specialized competencies. That might be a more difficult discussion, I imagine, although I am not the best judge. Perhaps each student/practitioner and graduate program would choose for themselves, in their own contexts, what are core vs. specialized competencies for them. Yet the Kuperminc et al. discussion of this originated with an important experience to consider: in advisement with graduate students, advisors found that the entire list of 18 principles and competencies was overwhelming for students, especially early in their graduate education. Prioritizing areas for the student's focus in the coming year was challenging. Something similar can occur in discussing community psychologists' skills with community partners, employers, and colleagues outside our field. Our attempt to offer organizing categories in the current Practice Competencies was not sufficient; perhaps these need revisiting.

### *Dialectics and Conversations*

Inspired by the article by Kelly Collins et al. in these special issues, I began thinking about conversations about practice competencies in dialectical terms – as conversations with two opposing perspectives, each of value, and with room for synthesis, “both/and” reasoning, and recognition of paradoxes.

Collins et al. proposed a dialectic of *competencies vs. context*, arguing that while community psychology practice must be contextual, consideration of SCRA's decontextualized list of competencies could be helpful. They illustrated this with a description of a participatory approach to teaching and learning about practice competencies in a graduate course, led by Chris Keys. I highly recommend reading the Collins et al. article.

Another dialectic may emerge in these conversations: whether to focus on *general vs. specific conceptions of skills* for practice. In Isidro Maya Jariego's article in these special issues about competencies in the context of education and practice in Spain, he compared the SCRA competencies with the generic concepts relating to quality of psychological practice promulgated by the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EuroPsy). Clearly they differ in level of generality and intent. The EuroPsy concepts are defined across all types of psychological practice (clinical, health, educational, organizational), and are designed partly with accreditation and licensing in mind. The EuroPsy approach provides little guidance for students or professionals about the specific knowledge, interpersonal skills, and relational processes needed to assess and understand communities, plan and implement community initiatives, and evaluate their effects. As a generic professional guide, it is limited in articulating value positions that might guide social and community action. The SCRA guidelines, in contrast, were developed to provide at least some guidance to students, academic programs, and community psychologists in choosing what skills to develop in order to work effectively with community members, organizations, and policy-makers. They are intended to be consistent with the shared values of community psychologists, and to help initiate consideration of specific values, issues, and dilemmas in specific contexts.

However, Maya Jariego showed how the EuroPsy approach has sufficient latitude to be used to describe community psychology practice. Akhurst et al. did something similar in comparing generic British standards for professional psychology with the SCRA competencies. Perhaps it is worth discussing whether a revised SCRA competencies list might focus on more general conceptions of competencies (not in Foundational Principles, but in the rest of the list). This also dovetails with the Kuperminc et al. suggestion that we delineate core and specialized competencies, in addition to foundational principles. An advantage of more generic conceptions: there might be more room for contextual thinking about competencies, and for individual and program choices. A disadvantage: there would be less of an explicit bridge between foundational principles and what happens in community practice.

Finally, the critique offered by Akhurst et al. raises two questions that we ought always to keep in mind: Who controls the use of these competencies? Who benefits from them? There are multiple answers to these questions. (One of my answers is that many students already seem to be benefiting from them.) Yet we need to keep reminding ourselves of these questions.

I am happy to see that this formative process of questioning and deepening our shared conceptions continues, and the articles in these Special issues contribute to that growth. Practitioners, academics, students, and citizens all can inform future conceptions of these competencies.

## References

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