



Intersections of Competencies for Practice and Research in Community Psychology

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Intersections of Competencies for Practice and Research in Community Psychology

Abstract

The *Community Psychology Practice Competencies* (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012) have helped the field of community psychology clarify the skills necessary to engage in community practice in our discipline and have begun to be used for designing curricula and other educational tools in community psychology training programs. Many community psychologists, however, combine elements of both practice and research in their work, and research skills are less represented in the practice competencies than other types of skills. Society for Community Research and Action's Council on Education recently developed a set of *Community Psychology Research Competencies* to provide additional depth of understanding of the types of skills and knowledge associated with rigorous and impactful research in community psychology. This paper describes the research competencies and their development and considers them in the context of the existing practice competencies in the interests of expanding the understanding of how research and practice intersect in our training programs and our work in both academic and non-academic settings. An action-research cycle model is presented to help explain how practice and research competencies complement one another and how both are informed by a common set of principles guiding all the activities of our field. Recommendations are then offered for integrating the research and practice competencies across practice- or research-focused training programs.

Introduction

Initially delineated through a collaborative effort of the Community Psychology Practice Council (CPPC) and the Council of Education Programs (now known as and referred to in this document as the Council on Education, or CoE) (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012), the *Community Psychology Practice Competencies* (hereafter, practice competencies) are an important accomplishment for the field. Prior to establishing the practice competencies, the field lacked a clear, widely accepted description of the specific skills that underlie community psychology practice and how to engage in them effectively (Bloom, 1973). The development of practice competencies sought to identify and generate an appreciation for activities associated with community psychology practice. Consequently, the list of competencies clearly prioritizes practice objectives. These competencies, as well as the work of the CPPC more broadly, redressed a

perceived imbalance between research and practice in training and professional development (Dalton & Julian, 2009). Following their inception, the practice competencies have been used as the basis for resources and tools for educators, programs, and professional training activities in community psychology (e.g., Connell, et al., 2013; Scott & Wolfe, 2015).

Many community psychologists combine elements of both practice and research in their health promotion, social action, and social change efforts, so it is not surprising that two of the 18 practice competencies explicitly address research or research-related activities (*Participatory Research and Program Evaluation*), and several others appear to verge on or relate closely to research-related activities (e.g., *Public Policy Analysis, Development and Advocacy*). Although not necessarily intended to focus on research competencies, the presence of these

research-related activities in the practice competencies points to the importance of research-related skills in community psychology as well as the connections between practice and research. They leave open opportunity for further definition of research-related skills and training objectives for the field, as well as further exploration of how these practice and research skills, activities, and objectives complement one another to help make community psychology a robust and impactful field. The strong impressions of such opportunity among members of the CoE prompted discussions about articulating research competencies and whether developing such competencies could provide additional clarity and guidance for educational programs, students, and professionals in community psychology.

We begin this paper with a description of the CoE's early pursuits in developing community psychology research competencies, which are based on qualitative analyses of interviews with selected community psychologists and presented in the appendix. We then build on our initial analysis and findings from these interviews, describing content on the relationship of practice and research and providing a conceptual analysis that highlights intersections and distinctions between the research and practice competencies. A modification of a long-standing model of the research-practice relationship – the action-research cycle – is offered to demonstrate how the activities and skills associated with the two lists of competencies complement one another in efforts for social action and social change sought by community psychologists. Finally, we discuss relevance and implications for practice- and research-focused training in community psychology.

Developing Community Psychology Research Competencies

Early discussions within the CoE about defining research competencies suggested a

shared sense of the potential for these research competencies. In consultation with members of the CPPC who had led the process of creating the practice competencies, the CoE began gathering information on research competencies from existing relevant sources, such as Rappaport and Seidman's (2000) *Handbook of Community Psychology* and Jason and Glenwick's (2012) *Methodological Approaches to Community-based Research*, and CoE members' experiences from their own research and roles in various education programs. Next, members of the CoE conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with senior and early career Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) members, including SCRA Fellows and recipients of the SCRA Early Career Award, collectively offering a wealth of experience in both academic and practice settings.

In developing the protocol for these semi-structured interviews, the CoE members realized that 'competencies', while perhaps helpful as a shorthand, was sometimes an awkward term for describing research. Well-conducted research in community psychology involves not only specific skills in design and implementation, but also familiarity with relevant theory and perspectives. We asked respondents to identify such perspectives as well as skills they believed were important to conducting good community psychology research. Adapting a gradient developed for the practice competencies, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which, for each skill or perspective, community psychologists should seek to gain *expertise* (advanced proficiency or knowledge), or whether some level of *experience* (basic proficiency) or *exposure* (familiarity) might suffice. The diverse responses of the interview respondents reflected the many different research modalities that are employed in the community psychology field (Jason & Glenwick, 2016).

Coding and analysis of the interview data led to the identification of an initial list of skills and perspectives as well as a third category of “foundational” competencies, or areas articulated by respondents that encompassed both skills and perspectives or cut across multiple domains of the community research process (e.g., abilities to understand complex setting-level dynamics, to identify key points of leverage for maximum impact). The resultant list and the importance attached to list items by interview participants were discussed in a roundtable session at the 2015 SCRA Biennial conference and summarized in a progress report in *The Community Psychologist* (Christens, Connell, Faust, Haber, et al., 2015). After these initial presentations, the CoE team used feedback, results from additional interviews, and recoding of these and initial interviews to refine the wording and presentation of the competencies. A version of the list reflecting this additional work is included in the supplementary materials for this article. This document is living – the CoE welcomes feedback to further refine the competencies and expects this initial list will continue to evolve.

Several points are important to keep in mind when interpreting the research competencies list. First, the competencies are designed to provide a framework for thinking about graduate and post-graduate training and education, but are not intended to serve as a basis for community psychology researcher certifications or accreditation of community psychology research training. The diversity of programs contributing to the competency list largely precludes generating one authoritative set of competency areas that could be applied to all types of community research training. Given the methodological diversity present and valued in the field, we would caution against using our list to narrow the self-definition of researchers per methods (e.g., quantitative or qualitative only). Additionally, these are not intended to be competencies for academics, and we do

not equate research and academia. Community psychologists around the world conduct research in a wide variety of settings, and this effort is in service of such work. Finally, the research competencies presented in the appendix and discussed in this article were developed independently of the practice competencies; however, given the close relationship between practice and research in the field suggested by a consensus of community psychologists, many programs may be concerned with both and therefore might want to consider the ways they might complement or overlap with one another.

Practice and Research Domains and Competencies

As noted above, interview findings primarily provided material for the development of research competencies. In addition, subsequent analysis of interviews and findings consistently pointed to relationships between practice and research in the field. We discuss these connections further below. First, we consider how interview respondents related research and practice domains more generally. With this framing in mind, we then delineate relationships between specific research and practice competency areas and examine conceptual relationships between the two lists in more detail.

Relationships between Practice and Research Domains

One question almost universally considered in our interviews was the extent to which practice and research should be distinguished at all. To begin with, a broad definition of practice – essentially, coordinated, aim-focused action, or more colloquially “what community psychologists do” – clearly includes research (Dokecki, 1996; Hess, 2005). Community psychologists quite deliberately “muddy the waters” regarding the research-practice distinction, based on the conviction that closely linking these activities conventionally considered to be

separate can advance shared values of the field. What many consider to be good research could be considered a form of practice. As one researcher we interviewed stated, “good CP work is based in practice and action. If you are a practitioner you still use research for practice and vice versa.” Another memorably observed that seeing someone as a “researcher” and *not* a practitioner may be something of an insult: “I have frequently bristled when my community psychology colleagues have implied that those of us in academia aren’t doing practice when much of the research that we do is practice!” There were also concerns about the ways institutional constraints contribute to the separation of research and practice activities (e.g., the premium placed on publication in scholarly journals in many academic institutions).

Despite these arguments, a number of interview respondents distinguished between practice and research contexts by describing the types of skills and activities that might be applicable. For example, large group facilitation, logic modeling, or visual presentation skills might be relatively more important in practice contexts, whereas complex data analytic techniques, the collaborative identification of key research questions, and managing team science may be relatively more important in research contexts. Some differentiated between skills associated with more generalizable versus local investigation, a phenomenon discussed further below, with some aligning local investigation more closely with practice (for competing views, cf. Dzidic, Breen, & Bishop, 2013; Hess, 2005). While certainly not universal, some interview respondents also suggested the style of communication differed in practice and research contexts, with practice-related communication tailored to needs of particular stakeholders and research for scholarly publication.

A variety of tensions between value systems sometimes thought to be endemic to practice

or research were also described, which played a role in interview respondents’ determination not simply of what to include, but also what would be elevated as essential in research versus practice (or, in the nomenclature of our competency development efforts, requiring “expertise” versus “exposure” or “experience”). These tensions included notions of validity (e.g., “participatory/local” versus “external” validity), “rigor” versus “currency” or utility, precision versus accessibility, emphasis of theory versus application, pluralistic and “blended” versus “pure” design. It was noted, however, that highly effective practitioners and researchers can navigate these tensions in their work such that values sometimes thought to apply to research can be applied to practice and vice versa.

Relationships between Practice and Research Competencies

Interview respondents, as well as participants in our SCRA Biennial conference session, made compelling arguments for the utility of delineating research competencies. While not the only reason, one purpose for doing so focused on evaluating or designing programs that may carry more practice or research-oriented training. Choices of what to emphasize in professional and academic educational settings, both at the level of an individual student and of the training program, are necessary given the limited capacity of a given person or curriculum to convey mastery of the full breadth of skills required to be equally expert in both practice and research. Even though most of our respondents believed one could reasonably distinguish between practice and research, and with caveats, it might be helpful to do so at certain points in early training, they felt a complete separation should be universally avoided. All in one manner or another cautioned against creating too a strong conceptual distinction between research and practice in developing the lists of competencies, and in so doing

misrepresenting or disrupting the close relationship of research and practice characteristic of the field. Views were not uniform, however, on precisely how research and practice domains differed or intersected with one another.

A comparison of the practice and research competencies highlights several relationships relevant to the field of community psychology and in particular educational and training programs. One is the close connection between the practice competencies' foundational principles of practice and the aforementioned research perspectives. Another is the presence of practice-related skills in research, suggesting various skills associated with practice are important to community psychology across practice and research contexts. Lastly, there are new insights generated by the development of research competencies that are relevant for community change processes.

Foundational principles for community psychology Ecological theories, theories of empowerment and power, theories of human well-being and flourishing, and critical theory were all recognized as important perspectives for community research. Given that many of these theoretical frames were taken into consideration in the development of the practice competencies, it is not surprising that such research perspectives align with the practice competencies' foundational principles. In fact, many of the practice competencies' foundational principles were often cited themselves by interview respondents as important for research in community psychology. For example, *Analyses of Power and Interdependence* was noted as essential to both equitable research partnerships and team science. Similarly, *Ethical, Reflective Practice* and *Exercising Socio-cultural Awareness* were identified as fundamental to understanding how identity and group membership influence beliefs about knowledge creation and selection of research

methodologies. Theoretical approaches that underlie these principles also inform conceptual questions and frame knowledge creation through community research. For community psychology, therefore, it could be suggested that these principles and theoretical bodies of work taken together may be considered foundational to the entire discipline, rather than just for practice or research.

Practice-related activities in research competencies Several research competencies identified include activities that overlap with those covered by practice competencies. This overlap suggests potential areas of skills pertinent across practice and research contexts in community psychology. Comparing how these activities are framed in the practice and research competencies also suggests some differences in their application in practice and research contexts. For example, both the research competency *Capacity Building with Community Partners* and the various practice competencies included under the category of "Community and Organizational Capacity Building", such as *Consultation and Organizational Development*, involve supporting organizations and community leaders in identifying needs, assets, and goals. Indeed, capacity building in a research context is similar in many ways to capacity building in a practice context in that it is an ongoing collaborative process of building trusting partnerships to enhance change efforts. In addition, the research competency focuses on developing a shared capacity to make the research process in particular useful for change through negotiations around identifying practice-based hypotheses that connect to broader theories of change and clarifying processes of knowledge production.

Relatedly, the research competency, *Collaborative Research and Inquiry* also includes aspects of practice competencies under the heading "Community and Organizational Capacity Building" as part of

research team collaborations. The practice of team science necessitates the identification of common goals among research partners, facilitation of collaborative processes, and cultivating the leadership skills of other collaborators, especially those partners newer to community research or coming from community organizations that are less familiar with incorporating inquiry into their social change work. This work can be particularly difficult when done across disciplines, paradigms, methodologies, and sectors, when good facilitation and well-managed group processes can make or break the impact that inquiry can have.

Despite their differences, practice-related activities related to capacity building, goal setting, asset identification, and team and process management are shared across practice and research competencies and could be a place of emphasis for the professional development of community psychologists who focus on either practice or research.

New insights generated by research competencies Given their intentional focus on strategies for inquiry in community psychology, the research competencies offer additional depth to the practice competencies of *Participatory Community Research* and *Program Evaluation*. The practice competencies identify *Participatory Community Research* as “the ability to work with community partners to plan and conduct research that meets high standards of scientific evidence that are contextually appropriate, and to communicate the findings of that research in ways that promote community capacity” (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012, p. 13). This description highlights the importance of using various methods appropriate for different contexts and purposes, without compromising scientific rigor. Many of the research competencies bring an extended understanding to what is meant by planning and conducting research that meets high standards of scientific

evidence through their focus on various approaches to research and methods for preserving rigor.

Research competencies related to research design are of particular significance, given the calls in community psychology for socially impactful research and the proliferation of complex methodologies that can capture context and contribute to social action in a variety of ways. Participatory community research and program evaluation were both identified as specific research designs in interviews, with participatory design as an area in which community psychology researchers should show “expertise”. These were two designs among many used to generate impactful research. Similar to the sentiment suggested in the practice competencies, interview respondents emphasized that design selection should not be an activity of the researcher alone, rather the various stakeholders involved in the study should also be shaping design and methods, particularly those most impacted by the research outcomes. The research competencies offer additional insight into which specific designs and methods might generate the type of knowledge in service of community and social change, be it in practice or research focused contexts.

Comparing the research competency of *Diffusion of Information and Innovation* and the practice competency *Dissemination and Building Public Awareness* illustrates new insights into community research made clearer by the research competencies. These competencies are similar in that both identify the importance of tailoring information for diverse audiences. The spread of information in community research, however, is not just about translating and educating. The ability to establish findings that are communicable for different contexts is specifically connected to the design of research for these contexts, done in collaboration with partners. In this vein, one interviewee suggested that at the level of national policy and program design,

experimental design, quantitative methods, and external validity are particularly important in order to convey information about community change models. At the state or local level, high quality quantitative research that draws on anecdotes can be particularly impactful. At the local level, participatory research that deeply engages individuals can be powerful, particularly when external validity is less of a focus. In addition, communicating effectively about research includes clearly articulating the limitations of research in considering implications for action.

Noting the connections between design and dissemination is important given that many interview respondents emphasized influencing public policy through communication and translation of research. They suggested that community psychology has long been able to translate and disseminate information to impact local programs and community systems, but has not been as effective at influencing policy on a broader scale. While the practice competencies include the ability to engage in *Public Policy Analysis, Development and Advocacy*, designing research specifically in these venues differs. One interview respondent suggested community researchers need to be especially skilled in avoiding oversimplification when translating their work into practical terms and often can benefit from working with community partners to maintain a connection between research, policy recommendations, and social change efforts.

Two research competencies that bring additional depth and insight into research in community psychology beyond the research-related practice competencies are the *Connection of Practical Problems to Critical Questions* and the *Critical Development and Application of Theory*. These competencies, along with the explicit discussion of perspectives, help connect research, including research-related activities done in practice

contexts, to the foundational principles that undergird community psychology as a field. They contribute to the formulation of research questions that are specific enough to generate new insights into practical processes and still connect to large and complex theories of change used as foundations for social action. They also connect research in community psychology to discussions grounded in the philosophy of science, such as those highlighted in a recent issue of the *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* (see Jason, et al., 2016).

Applying some of the insights presented here to the concept of program evaluation can provide an example. Program evaluation is considered a practice competency and was also identified by some of our interview respondents as research design. Program evaluation may pertain to a particular program and context (specificity, locality), involves pragmatic research design, is sometimes not theory-driven, and can be reported in ways that may prioritize accessibility over precision (Patton, 2008; Scriven, 2016). At the same time, program evaluation should still be infused with theoretical relevance and rigor, speak to conceptual questions of the broader field, and explore or expand on models for community change and how aspects of the continuum, from microsystems up to social policy, influence people and vice versa.

Bridging program evaluation with key research competencies such as the *Connection of Practical Problems to Critical Conceptual Questions, Research Design, and Critical Development and Application of Theory* can breathe a different sort of life into evaluation that situates it in a body of knowledge about social action and social change. For example, research designs suited for capturing variability in application of a program model across settings (e.g., multi-level models) can provide opportunities to more rigorously examine the influence of settings on the “core components”, on central features of a model

(Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005), or on its outcomes (e.g., Koroloff, Haber, and Walker, 2016).

In addition, innovations in research and inquiry themselves are also useful to disseminate. A complex multi-level intervention identified as an innovation in practice may have a parallel innovation in research designs developed to assess multi-level interventions. Many community psychologists are on the cutting edge of applying critical perspectives, innovative mixed methods, and participatory research designs to address important social issues. There is a shared need to be able to communicate with others about both research and practice innovations across disciplines, with communities, and to policy makers.

A New Take on an Old Research – Practice Cycle

With respect to the relationship between practice and research domains, several interview respondents suggested that the divide could be at least partly overcome through effective collaboration between those who identify as primarily practitioners with those who identify themselves as researchers. Others proposed that an awareness of the diverse practice and research competencies and the relationships between them could assist in understanding what competencies offer practice and research domains. For example, action and practice should inform which questions are identified as important, how questions are framed, and selection of design and methodology, while strong research designs should be understood for their capacities to demonstrate the impact of interventions or influence social change processes. These discussions encouraged a melding of research and practice competencies in a way that still afforded the opportunity to consider distinct aspects of skill development and contexts for application of different competencies.

The symbiosis described between practice and research, which indeed can be understood as a driving force in the discipline, resembles research-action cycles dating back to the action research and pragmatism of Kurt Lewin and John Dewey (Lewin, 1946; Dewey, 1925). Several of our respondents suggested this conceptualization, either using extant research-action cycle terminology or more informally in terms of mutually beneficial feedback loops, with research and practice activities enmeshed – at best strategically – in efforts for community change. A research-action cycle offers a useful structure for considering the relationship between research and practice domains and the intersection between the research and practice competencies in service of community and social change efforts. *Figure 1* is an illustration combining both research and practice competencies in a single such cycle, reflecting the particular ways research and practice intersections were described in our interviews and outlined above.

Partnerships for social action and social change sit at the core of this cycle, shaping the basic purposes for research and influencing research and practice together. Of note, some would take issue with characterizing research and practice as equal and mutually beneficial complements in this way, warning that doing so may constrain or undermine both. Research, construed apart from practice, can reflect and benefit privilege and thus tends to support privileged points of view and not those of other stakeholders (Dzidic et al., 2013). Speaking to this critique, interview respondents often emphasized the role of the foundational principles in research and that they should be considered in each aspect of the research process. Therefore, the relationship between the foundational principles for practice and the perspectives described above encircles the core of the research-action cycle. When combined with partnerships for social action

and social change, they together comprise the ethos and values of research-action cycles in community psychology. These central forces emanate outward and drive what questions

are asked, who asks them, how knowledge is harnessed or created, and for what purposes. Action and application encompass practice

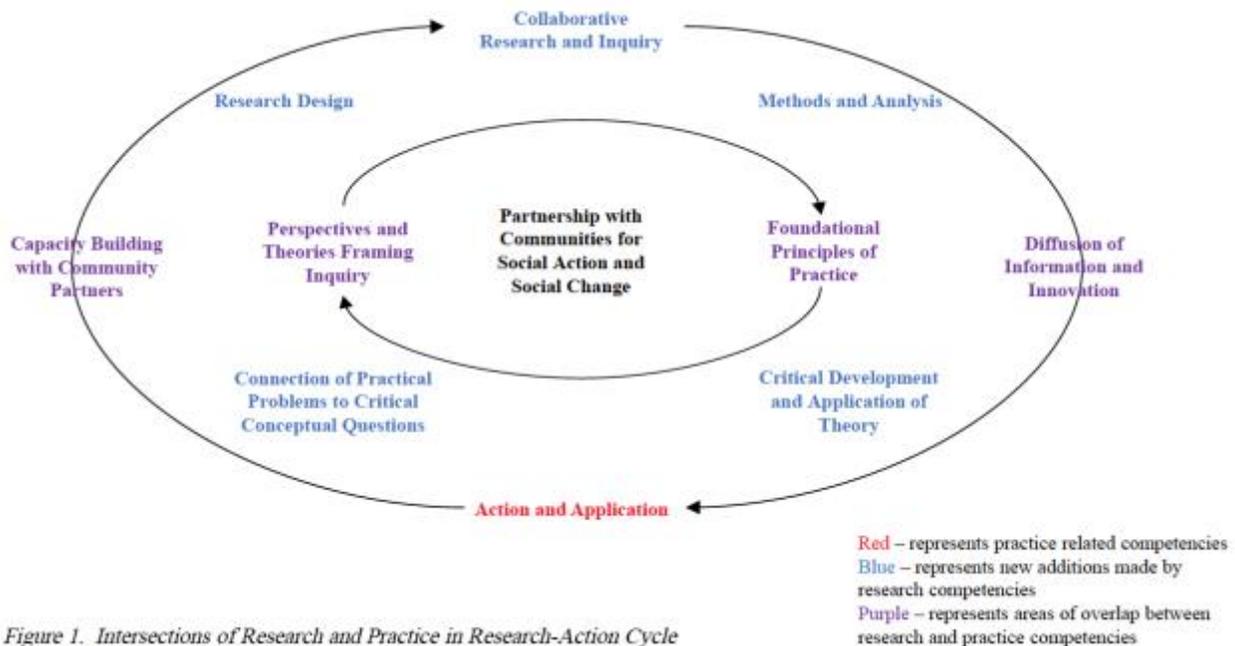


Figure 1. Intersections of Research and Practice in Research-Action Cycle

competencies such as *Program Development, Implementation and Management, Prevention and Health Promotion, Community Development, Community Organizing, and Public Policy Analysis, Development and Advocacy*. This image incorporates research competencies, such as *Connecting Practical Problems to Critical Conceptual Questions* and *Critical Development and Application of Theory*, that reinforce the role of theories, models, frameworks, and other conceptual tools in the cyclical relationship of research and practice in community psychology. In addition, the representation of them in a research-action cycle suggests further discussion about the value of theory to practitioners (and the value of practice-based theory). For example, the research-action

cycle was mentioned by interview respondents in relation to particular research and practice competencies, such as the helpfulness of theory in crafting coherent explanations and predictions of events for the practice of policy advocacy. Therefore, the notion of a cycle derived from our interviews is the central organizing concept for our proposed model for relating research and practice competencies.

Utility of Competencies in a Research-Practice Cycle for Educators and Practitioners

The delineation of research competencies to complement and expand on the existing practice competencies, the consideration of

the relationship between practice and research, the analysis of the intersections and new insights generated, and the connections of the competencies in a research-practice cycle have implications for practitioners, researchers, and educators. For educators working to equip their students with appropriate research skills, the research competencies can serve as a template for reviewing graduate programs and assessing the extent to which coursework and experiences outside the classroom cover the various skills. Faculty, program directors, and other administrators may wish to review program requirements and assess the extent to which community research perspectives, research design, data collection and analysis, and the meta-competencies for research are covered. Relatedly, practice-focused programs may be interested in assessing the extent to which theoretical foundations of the discipline are understood and connected to effective practice frameworks or the degree to which students understand different research designs and their implications for using data in practice. This process may serve to identify areas of weakness in community psychology and community research and action education programs and provide direction for strengthening curricula.

In addition to serving as a review template for education programs, the research competencies could be incorporated alongside the practice competencies into the conceptual foundation for designing community-based fieldwork, internships, and thesis or dissertation guidelines. The interlacing of these competencies may be of particular interest for designing learning objectives in structured progressions of community-based experiences.

The foundational competencies relevant to both practice and research, for example, could be incorporated and analyzed at various times into practice-oriented or research-oriented community-based experiences. In addition, depending on the

setting and the goal of the particular learning experience, theories and perspectives including empowerment, multicultural theory, and critical theory may be useful in conceptualizing the work. Research competencies may be relevant to varying degrees at different stages of the experience. Some students may focus on bringing data to bear on community issues or in community advocacy contexts, while others may be practicing elements of research design in preparation for theses, dissertations, or as leads in research projects.

Examples of the incorporation of both research and practice into fieldwork training can be found in the community psychology programs at DePaul University and National Louis University (NLU), both discussed in detail in a recent article on the implications of the practice competencies for community psychology (Sánchez, Jimenez, Viola, Kent & Legler, in press). At NLU, students engage in a series of guided, community-based experiences that allow them the opportunity to utilize both research and practice competencies. At DePaul, students in both the community and the clinical-community programs are required to take a year-long fieldwork course that, while emphasizing practice competencies, allows for applied research opportunities such as program evaluation.

From a practice perspective, the specification of research competencies provides clearer descriptions of the tools available for the community practitioner engaging in inquiry. For those practicing community psychology outside of an academic setting, the research competencies discussed here may suggest directions for professional development. Further, the explication of research competencies may provide community psychologists in a variety of settings with ideas for fresh approaches to their community work. Common areas of applied community work such as program evaluation, consultation, organizational development,

community development and change, and resource development can all benefit when the community practitioner ensures that he or she is at least familiar with the breadth of skills identified in the research competencies and is comfortable using the appropriate research methods in the right situation.

The practice competencies have been successful at clarifying the dimensions of community psychology practice, the skills necessary to engage in this practice, and a framework for practice and educational programming in the field. Further building on the delineation of practice competencies, the CoE encourages ongoing discussion of related, and intricately connected, research competencies. The intersections of the competencies highlight potential places of emphasis in academic programming and professional training that draw together instead of bifurcate research and practice for health promotion and social change.

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