



Celebrating Our Evolving, Interdisciplinary, Contextually-Embedded Field

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What use is a theory if it cannot describe, explain, specify, and predict phenomena of interest? Applying this metric, Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, and Gleason (2016) demonstrate the limits of three of the foundational theories of community psychology. The challenge for these and other theories stems from the field's complexity and multiple levels of analysis. Consequently, many of the defining constructs (e.g., neighborhood, social ecology, empowerment) are insufficiently specified and tested. Developing a stronger, more predictive theoretical base for the field, the authors argue, will depend on shared conceptualizations and greater precision in the measurement of its core constructs. The key to all of this is specification. In fact, Jason et al. (2016) use the terms "specification," "specify," and "specific" 29 times, as in "The goal for Community Psychology theories should ideally specify what *specific* aspects of context influence what *specific* aspects of individuals. Furthermore, possible *specific* mechanisms by which this occurs should be articulated ..." (p.21).

With this sort of specificity in place, researchers can develop the shared vocabulary and tools that are needed to conduct rigorously controlled studies that advance theories and explore the underlying processes governing change. They can also examine, with far greater precision, the ways in which these processes are shaped by contexts in which they unfold. Such an approach would better align community psychology with other psychology disciplines, most of which have evolved toward far greater rigor and specification over the past half century. Yet, in light of the inherently interdisciplinary nature of community psychology, its attunement to evolving societal issues, and its broad, multi-level foci, one could argue that community psychology may never yield to the rigors and conventions of traditional psychological inquiry in ways that produce a distinct unifying theory.

Most of the core values and beliefs that first galvanized community

psychologists were derived from a complex of disciplines that preceded it. Indeed, long before the first psychologist ever set foot on the shores of Swampscott, Massachusetts, the fields of anthropology, education, social work, urban planning, sociology, law, political science, and economics had developed rich traditions and frameworks for studying communities, power relationships, and social change. The three prominent theories highlighted in the Jason, et al. (2016) piece were built on a foundation that was laid by theorists in other fields and speak to the issues and anxieties of their day. For example, many of the core tenants of empowerment theory can be traced to the black power and activist social work movements of the 1960's and 1970's (Solomon, 1976). Interestingly, it was also informed by conservative political sociologists, Peter L. Berger and Richard Neuhaus (1976) who, in an influential American Enterprise pamphlet, first highlighted the importance of "mediating structures"

in the form of families, churches, neighborhoods and voluntary associations as an antidote to big government. This emergence of empowerment theory to explain and justify the politics of collective power and government restraint aligns with Perkins's (2009) observations concerning the intractable links between community theory and the political landscape from which they emerged. And this sort of inflection will continue to shape how we conceptualize communities and power relationships. As we struggle with unprecedented income inequality, sociological and economic theories of social capital, access, and discrimination are likely to continue to dominate the theoretical landscape of community psychology.

Rather than despair at the derivative and contextually inflected nature of the theories, we should more fully embrace our rich and responsive interdisciplinary history. Sociologist John Hall (1999) described a "pandisciplinarity" (p.179) characterized by an

emergent network of communication, unevenly tied together by nodal connections among discourses, practices, and procedures of translation that push back the frontier of any absolute differend. Knowledge produced by way of culturally coherent practices of inquiry and their contestation can result in more than storytelling, even in the absence of an encompassing pure Reason. (p.179)

As a field, we may never compete with the rigor and specificity achieved in the more decontextualized psychological disciplines. But this does have to consign us to inferiority or irrelevance. Instead, our unique strength lies in our openness to diverse disciplinary perspectives, a sensitivity to the diverse and shifting contexts of social behavior, and the innovative strategies that can flexibly explore social behavior at multiple levels of analysis (Perkins, 2009; Shinn & Rapkin, 2000).

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