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Community Psychology as a Linking Science Potentials and Challenges for Transdisciplinary Competences

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Community Psychology as a Linking Science Potentials and Challenges for Transdisciplinary Competences

Abstract

In a globalized world, traditional values of Community Psychology, like community building, social change and empowerment, require more than working in a local community and/or improving the social situation of specific groups. While this work will remain an important core part of Community Psychology, the field of Community Psychology also should empower itself: by using its competencies to develop social innovations, focusing at emerging futures by developing shared goals (and take shared risks), and by collaborating with other disciplines, societal institutions, business companies or other actors in society in order to make a difference in the world. Community Psychology as a global academic field and a practical challenges has a rich history based on different disciplines, on various political and value backgrounds coming from traditional and industrialized regions and countries from all parts of the world. To use this richness, we have to start to learn from each other and to value different approaches. Therefore, in the future, Community Psychology should focus both on macro- and micro-issues of community analysis and community building, and it should develop its identity as a “linking science” fertilizing different approaches into a both overall and culture-specific approach of community-based research and practice. To achieve these goals, it will be important to elaborate and re-identify the “DSA of community psychology”: *Design Skills* to develop both strategic-innovative and creative abilities in order to nurture mutual knowing, awareness and playfulness, *Social Skills* to enhance the art of community building as a collaborative and empowering process, leading to social responsiveness and inclusion. *Action Skills* to learn how to co-create, implement and evaluate new concepts and social innovations to build communities in different settings.

Introduction

Being a community psychologist always has been a quest for new ways to deal with psychosocial problems not only on the individual level, but also to look for potentials and challenges of people and social settings. Community Psychology also has been and will be in the future a quest for a political identity as a psychologist who wants to improve social justice and individual well-being in a complex world.

That is why Michael Frese's (2006)¹ challenging question: “What if Applied Psychology Mattered in the World?” fits perfectly if we ask for community psychology's identity in a complex and globalizing world. Frese stated that psychology today needs a currency that is as important and respected as money. Therefore, psychology should develop well-being and happiness as a psychological currency in contrast

to money and economic goods only. In order to achieve this, psychology needs to have an impact on all spheres of social life – community and social systems, economy, politics, etc.

For the future of our world, well-being, individual and collective happiness and social justice will become important elements of a currency which should be more important than money. Many multidisciplinary studies have shown that the key to individual well-being is maintaining social networks, community building, and enhance empowerment processes. Therefore, asking “What if Community Psychology Mattered in the World?” can show substantial categories for a social currency developed by community psychology (CP). Based on this notion, this paper will try to make a point for a Community Psychology of the future, based on the idea of a linking science, using the knowledge and craftsmanship of different areas and disciplines, and the professional capabilities of specialist practioners as well as the practical wisdom of neighborhood groups and of everyday life.

¹ Michael Frese, the past president of the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP), delivered this paper as a keynote paper in Athens at the Congress of IAAP 2006.

Community Psychology – Concepts of a “linking science”

Community Psychology has had many origins before it has been called Community Psychology (Bennett et al., 1966). To name a few: community organizing (Alinsky, 1989) and the Community Mental Health Movement (Bloom, 1973) in the US; Conscientization (Freire, 1996) and Action Research (Fals Borda, 1991) in Latin America; Marie Jahoda's (1972) groundbreaking long-term study on the effects of unemployment on the community or the Italian Democratic Psychiatry Movement (Basaglia, 1968) in Europe have influenced many community psychologists. Equivalently, many political movements (Civil Rights, Student's Movements of the 60s, Women's Liberation, Gay's Movements, Equal Rights for Handicapped Persons, Survivors of Psychiatric Hospitals and many more) have had considerable impact on research and practice of community psychology. Although the term “Community Psychology” has been developed in the US and still is being dominated by the discourse of the scientific community, we have to realize that there are many other developments in many parts of the world with different background and important contributions.

If one compares Community Psychology to other psychological disciplines, the picture is quite a paradox: Community Psychology on the one hand looks like a small island of science and practice being not very influential within the large discipline of psychology; but at the same time discourses and research topics of Community Psychology seem to have a broad impact on many disciplines. One of the reasons for this paradoxical picture is the basic concept of Community Psychology: the field conceptually always has oriented itself towards a systemic view of social dynamics in the world by integrating individual and group levels, community, organizational and societal levels of analysis. Because the concept of community psychology is transdisciplinary by nature, its identity bears a wide variety of regional and individual scholarly stories, and is trying to integrate personal value systems and scientifically based interdisciplinary research and practice within its boundaries. Julian Rappaport already in 1977 summarized the idea of community psychology: “...the real key to social change is in the attitudes, values, goals and political-economic ideology and social policy of which institutions themselves are composed and on which organisations are based.” (Rappaport 1977: 180). But, although this systemic view is in the core of Community

Psychology's belief system and has been developed since 30-40 years, it never has grown to be dominant in teaching and research. Having to survive in an academic world of distinct disciplines, there are only few consequences based on the systemic view of Community Psychology; quite the contrary, more than 80% of research and practice in Community Psychology still is restricted to individual or group levels.

Especially today the transdisciplinary concept of Community Psychology has the potential to be one of the most powerful applied psychologies in civil society. By linking:

- The strengths of different traditional disciplines (psychology, sociology, organizational science, anthropology, art, educational science, social work and social medicine)
- The spheres of academic science and the practical areas, addressing real world challenges of our time.
- And the analytical view on the past, and creative ideas for the future.

Community Psychology is going beyond traditional applied sciences: It is not only applying scientific results for praxis, but adds new questions and ideas on individual, social and societal issues by using systematically a transdisciplinary approach.

In order to unfold its potentials, a Community Psychology “linking science” wants to unleash itself from the limits of traditional academic disciplines and taxonomies: The social network and social support research already brought close collaboration between psychology, sociology and anthropology, and is also providing links to virtual networks in the world wide web which are relevant for social network research today, such as the complexity and global nature of today's and tomorrow's challenges on the micro-, meso- and macro-level problems of migration or demographic change and challenges of sustainability; but also the systemic patterns of today's organizations or of modern medicine. All call for a transdisciplinary approach, which is generally built-in to Community Psychology - if we as community psychologists use its potential.

Community Building in a Civil Society

In the process of globalization, one can find contradictory movements: The erosion of traditional community structures is alienating both individuals and social networks; at the same time, for many

continuous change processes in social life, and meeting new people and cultures both in reality and the virtual world, is both a burden and a chance to discover new opportunities and to develop innovative ideas. By analyzing risks and opportunities of globalization, eminent scholars like Anthony Giddens (2001), Zygmunt Bauman (2000) or Ulrich Beck (2005) all agree, that active community building processes in order to develop a culture of “learning communities” will be indispensable to overcome the risks and dangers of globalization. Castells’ analysis (2000) of the “network society” already emphasized the need for a culture of community which both, on the local and the virtual level, will determine our future communication.

Here, a future Community Psychology has to readjust the traditional model of community as local neighborhoods towards a systemic view of the role of community building in organizations, (real and virtual) social networks on the local level and beyond, and on the level of civil society (citizen groups, local and global coalitions and alliances) (see Senge, 1990; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004; Wildemeersch & Stroobants 2003). Social networks, families, local communities and organizations (both companies and NGOs) in Europe will be challenged by continuing global migration processes, the need to adjust to considerable demographic changes and the quest for a new social justice in the world. And, if traditional structures are eroding, there will be an urgent need to develop common values in society together with all actors.

For Community Psychology, therefore, it will be necessary to develop a new and enhanced identity based on the field’s core values which is able to meet the challenges of a complex and globalized world. The steps described below - based on the guiding principles developed by an international group of community psychologist (adapted from Wolff et al., 2006) - may serve as a guideline for future research and action:

- Community psychology will become increasingly global in nature. This is why local communities are increasingly important because they are affected by global forces. Community psychology must collaborate with communities so they effectively adapt to such changes.
- A community psychology approach, by definition, must be an approach informed by multiple perspectives. Thus, the future of community psychology will require partnerships with other disciplines and community stakeholders. Community

Psychology will have to partner with others while maintaining its own unique identity.

- Community psychology will become more engaged in the formation and institutionalization of economic, and social policy. These policies will be based upon the values that are at the core of our discipline and will incorporate psychological principles. Involvement with policy is consistent with community psychology’s ecological perspective on community which recognizes the importance of macrosystem factors, such as business and policy, on communities.
- Community psychology will become a field of research and action that makes a significant difference on issues of social change by promoting social justice. Social justice is defined as conditions that promote equitable distribution of resources, equal opportunity for all, non-exploitation, prevention of violence, and active citizenry.

If the global, demographic and economic change we are witnessing is requiring a new perception of civil society, the role of Community Psychology is to initiate and maintain dialogue and mutual support with all actors interested in social change and social innovation. Therefore, Community Psychology should start to be a real “linking science” by:

- Discovering empowerment patterns between individuals, groups and social structures, not only in the neighborhood, but in all kind of settings where people work and live together (companies, virtual communities, social policy).
- Learning not only from the past, but sense emerging futures by learning across generations, cultures and institutions.
- Establishing new intersectoral alliances and test new forms of collaboration between different actors in society.
- Enabling mutual risk taking through experimental settings and program evaluation.

This requires to add to “incremental”, step-by-step social innovations forms of profound, more “radical” social innovations for which collaboration with other disciplines and actors are needed. Therefore the following section will show some exploratory fields of action and research to develop a “linking science” based on community psychology. Concrete potentials of Community Psychology as a linking science can be shown in the following exemplars of transdisciplinary approaches toward community building.

Discovering Empowerment Patterns.

The discourse on empowerment processes (Rappaport, Swift & Hess, 1984) in Community Psychology has been influential for many practical areas in community mental health and social work, psychiatry, community development and organizational science. In social policy the concept of empowerment has been adopted in various legislations in Europe and developed as a synonym for innovative approaches to social challenges and the growth of a consumer- and prosumer-oriented civil society. To use the dynamics of empowerment processes in order to enhance well-being and growth not only in individuals but also in social systems, it is important to link the different levels of empowerment (individuals – group – organization) (Stark, 1996). Empowerment as a concept has been adopted in various disciplines (sociology, management, software development, women's studies...) (see as an example for many: Dominelli, 1999). In order to understand the systemic potential of empowerment processes it may be helpful to analyze the patterns of empowerment developed in areas like the BoP (Base-of-the-Pyramid)-approach (Hart, 2007) to develop social business (not only) in emerging markets (Yunus, 2008).

Although the empowerment discourse has been extremely powerful in recent decades and had an impact not only on Community Psychology, but also on other disciplines and areas of work, the concept, from its start, still remains more as a professional attitude than a professional methodology or technique. A value-based approach may serve as an important basis to form a community psychology identity; in order to establish a technology for empowerment it helps to cross disciplinary boundaries: Christopher Alexander's groundbreaking book "A Pattern Language" (1978) is one of the most influential books in architecture, but at the same time hides important basic ideas for community psychology on establishing and nurturing a community, and offers a technology based on the patterns approach which has the potential to serve as a general language for empowerment. The idea of a pattern language has been adopted in many disciplines (one of the most important being software development, which developed many ideas on participation processes both in technological and pedagogical settings). But it has a potential not yet discovered systematically: To link the wisdom of different disciplines in order to understand and practice the art of empowerment and community building from different perspectives and to develop

its variety of potentials. Douglas Schuler (2008) and his PublicSphere-Project have started to develop a pattern language for organizing and community building which could ignite a move to develop a pattern language for empowerment and community building based on the scientific knowledge of community psychology together with other academic and practical fields.

Presencing – Learning from the Future as it Emerges.

The concept of "Presencing" (Senge et al., 2004) tries to expand our knowledge and praxis on community building by shifting our habit of learning from the past into an attitude of valuing the potentials within settings and to "create deep innovation through moving from egosystem to ecosystem awareness" (Scharmer, 2010). Based on more than 250 interviews with global leaders the concept identifies what Scharmer calls the "blind spot of leadership". He argues to slow down current processes of decision making which most often stick to disciplinary and situational knowledge and to avoid "quick fixes" both in economy and social policy in order to regenerate sources of common creativity and inspirational self, to reframe values and beliefs on how things have to be and can be fixed, and to redesign global and regional policies in economy, ecology and human equity.

To rediscover our personal and collective source of creativity and to avoid quick fixes by downloading old patterns, Scharmer (2007) proposes a seven-step-process starting from identifying past patterns of problem solving, shifting one's sense to new perspectives and a broader picture, identifying new potentials of collective creativity, crystallizing new vision and prototyping new ideas. This process structure and the built-in transformation could be a model of a community psychology learning journey integrating the body of community psychology research and practice together with the wisdom of other disciplines. It also integrates the views of major actors (economy – civil society – public institutions) in society and community building needed to develop a systemic approach toward challenges in the community.

Design Thinking – Experiential Learning based on Transdisciplinarity.

One of the most radical transdisciplinary approaches on societal and community challenges originally has been developed as an integrative and systematic

approach toward product and service design (Brown, 2009). The 30-year experience of IDEO (www.ideo.com) has led to a concept which not only has revolutionized innovation management in design, but also has considerable impact on a participative and transdisciplinary approach to address community challenges. Starting at Stanford University Schools for Design Thinking since few years ago it has been spreading throughout the world exemplifying how transdisciplinary approaches can help to address social problems. The HPI School for Design Thinking at the Potsdam University in Germany, for instance, in its 1-year-program is collaborating with students and faculty from 25 Universities, 40 disciplines and a growing number of companies and public institutions and community groups. Small interdisciplinary student and faculty groups are addressing a series of temporary design challenges culminating in a 12-week design challenge developed together with companies and public institutions.

The concept of Design Thinking is a wonderful and impressive example of the potentials of a transdisciplinary approach toward social problems, developing a collaborative scheme for actors in society as well as linking different academic discipline and praxis. Therefore, together with the two exemplars described before, Design Thinking also is an exemplar for Bruno Latour's "Reassembling the Social" (2005), which expands John Dewey's idea of experiential learning (1938) into modern societies.

Perspectives for a Future Community Psychology.

Traditional values of Community Psychology like social change and transformation and current challenges today require more than working in a local community and/or improving the social situation of specific groups. While this work will remain an important core part of Community Psychology, the field should empower itself, use its competencies to develop social innovations and look at emerging futures by developing shared goals (and take shared risks) by collaborating with other disciplines, companies, or other actors in society.

Community Psychology as a field should focus on macro- and micro-issues of community building together with various partners: This is why it is important to develop close ties not only with national and international community psychology groups in different parts of the world in order to develop a sense of cultural diversity, but also with other psychological and social science/social action

networks and associations. And, given the political character of community psychology, the political arena is an important area to be engaged in. In Europe, the European Union and the European Commission will be one of the most important partners to foster community building and a sense of community in our society.

To support this movement and to strengthen the capabilities of each community psychologist, we should form transdisciplinary Community Interest Groups (professional, student and practitioner groups) which will be able to maintain, and promote, the rich body of knowledge on community building and develop future questions which may be important for our society. We should invest in a joint education and practice in Transdisciplinary Community Psychology in order to develop the idea of community psychology for young professionals in all areas and of all disciplines. For this we can use and institutionalize a rich body of experience of community psychology programs in universities and schools all over Europe. The time of an interdisciplinary community building and social innovation master program should come within the next years. These kind of programs could enhance the DSA-skills for a transdisciplinary future of Community Psychology:

- *Design Skills* will develop both strategic-innovative and creative abilities in order to nurture mutual knowing, awareness and playfulness.
- In *Social Skills* students and practitioners will experience the art of community building as a collaborative and empowering background, leading to social responsiveness and inclusion.
- *Action Skills* will focus on how to co-create, implement and evaluate new concepts and social innovations to build communities in different settings.

Dan Stokols (2006) as one of very few community psychologists has promoted the idea of a science of transdisciplinary action research. Given the global and complex nature of problems and challenges, this approach can use original strengths of community psychology and offer new potentials for the enhancement of the field as part of a transdisciplinary, and, consequently, political movement of social responsibility. To teach and research the DSA of Community Psychology, there is a need for adequate institutional facilities through which a science-society dialogue can be established. In a transdisciplinarity laboratory, scientists from

various disciplines and non-scientists will cooperate for a certain period of time, aspire to a mutual learning process and conduct transdisciplinary research.

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