

Community Psychology

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Community psychology deals with the relationships of the individual to communities and the wider society. Community psychologists seek to understand the quality of life of individuals, communities, and society. Their aim is to enhance quality of life through collaborative research and action.

Community psychology makes use of various perspectives within and outside of psychology to address issues of communities, the relationships within them, and people's attitudes about them. Through collaborative research and action, community psychologists (practitioners and researchers) seek to understand and to enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and society. Rappaport (1977) discusses the perspective of community psychology as an ecological perspective with the person-environment fit being the focus of study and action instead of attempting to change the person or the environment when an individual is seen as having a problem.

Closely related disciplines include ecological psychology, environmental psychology, cross-cultural psychology, social psychology, political science, public health, sociology, social work, and community development.

Community psychology grew out of the community mental health movement, but evolved dramatically as early practitioners incorporated their understandings of political structures and other community contexts into perspectives on client services.

Society for Community Research and Action

Division 27 of the American Psychological Association is the community psychology division of the APA, called the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA). The Society's mission is as follows:

The Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) is an international organization devoted to advancing theory, research, and social action. Its members are committed to promoting health and empowerment and to preventing problems in communities, groups, and individuals. SCRA serves many different disciplines that focus on community research and action.

The SCRA website has resources for teaching and learning community psychology, information on events in the field and related to research and action, how to become involved and additional information on the field, members and undergraduate and graduate programs in community psychology.

History of community psychology in the US

In the 1950s and 1960s, many factors contributed to the beginning of community psychology in the US. Some of these factors include:

A shift away from socially conservative, individual-focused practices in health care and psychology into a progressive period concerned with issues of public health, prevention and social change after World War II

The perceived need of larger-scale mental illness treatment for veterans

Psychologists questioning the value of psychotherapy alone in treating large numbers of people with mental illness

The development of community mental health centers and deinstitutionalization of people with mental illnesses into their communities

Swampscott Conference

In 1965, several psychologists met to discuss the future of community mental health as well as discuss the issue of only being involved with problems of mental health instead of the community as a whole. The Swampscott Conference is considered the birthplace of community psychology. A published report on the conference calls for community psychologists to be political activists, agents of social change and "participant-conceptualizers."

Theories, concepts and values in community psychology

Ecological levels of analysis

James Kelly (1966; Trickett, 1984) developed an ecological analogy used to understand the ways in which settings and individuals are interrelated. Unlike the ecological framework developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the focus of Kelly's framework was not so much on how different levels of the environment may impact on the individual, but on understanding how human communities function. Specifically, Kelly suggests that there are 4 important principles that govern people in settings:

adaptation: i.e. that what individuals do is adaptive given the demands of the surrounding context

succession: every setting has a history that created current structures, norms, attitudes, and policies, and any intervention in the setting must appreciate this history and understand why the current system exists in the form that it does

cycling of resources: each settings has resources that need to be identified and possibilities for new resources to be developed; a resource perspective emphasizes a focus on strengths of individuals, groups, and institutions within the setting and interventions are more likely to succeed if they build on such existing strengths, rather than introduce new external mechanisms for change

interdependence: settings are systems, and any change to one aspect of the setting will have consequences for other aspects of the setting, so any intervention needs to anticipate its impact across the entire setting, and be prepared for unintended consequences.

First-order and second-order change

Because community psychologists often work on social issues, they are often working toward positive social change. Watzlawick, et al. (1974) differentiated between first-order and second-order change and how second-order change is often the focus of community psychology.

first-order change: changing the individuals in a setting to attempt to fix a problem.

second-order change: Attending to systems and structures involved with the problem to adjust the person-environment fit.

As an example of how these methods differ, consider homelessness. A first-order change to "fix" homelessness would be to offer shelter to one or many homeless people. A second-order change would be to address issues in policy regarding affordable housing.

Empowerment

One of the goals of community psychology involves empowerment of individuals and communities that have been marginalized by society.

One definition for the term is "an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (Cornell Empowerment Group).

Rappaport's (1984) definition includes: "Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives."

While empowerment has had an important place in community psychology research and literature, some have criticized its use. Riger (1993), for example, points to the paradoxical nature of empowerment being a masculine, individualistic construct being used in community research.

Social justice

A core value of community psychology is seeking social justice through research and action. Community psychologists are often advocates for equality and policies that allow for the wellbeing of all people, particularly marginalized populations.

Diversity

Another value of community psychology involves embracing diversity. Rappaport includes diversity as a defining aspect of the field, calling research to be done for the benefit of diverse populations in gaining equality and justice. This value is seen through much of the research done with communities regardless of ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, disability status, socioeconomic

status, gender and age.

Individual wellness

Individual wellness is the physical and psychological wellbeing of all people. Research in community psychology focuses on methods to increase individual wellness, particularly through prevention and second-order change.

Citizen participation

Citizen participation refers to the ability of individuals to have a voice in decision-making, defining and addressing problems, and the dissemination of information gathered on them. This is the basis for the usage of participatory action research in community psychology, where community members are often involved in the research process by sharing their unique knowledge and experience with the research team and working as co-researchers.

Collaboration and community strengths

Collaboration with community members to construct research and action projects makes community psychology an exceptionally applied field. By allowing communities to use their knowledge to contribute to projects in a collaborative, fair and equal manner, the process of research can itself be empowering to citizens. This requires an ongoing relationship between the researcher and the community from before the research begins to after the research is over.

Psychological sense of community

Psychological sense of community (or simply "sense of community"), was introduced in 1974 by Seymour Sarason. In 1986 a major step was taken by David McMillan and David Chavis with the publication of their "Theory of Sense of Community" and "Sense of Community Index." Originally designed primarily in reference to neighborhoods, the Sense of Community Index (SCI) can be adapted to study other communities as well, including the workplace, schools, religious communities, communities of interest, etc.

Empirical grounding

Community psychology grounds all advocacy and social justice action in empiricism. This empirical grounding is what separates community psychology from a social movement or grassroots organization. Methods from psychology have been adapted for use in the field that acknowledge value-driven, subjective research involving community members. The methods used in community

psychology are therefore tailored to each individual research question. Quantitative as well as qualitative methods and other innovative methods are embraced.

Education

Education connection

For information about Education in Community Psychology

Many programs related to community psychology are housed in psychology departments, while others are interdisciplinary. Students earning a community psychology degree complete courses that focus on: history and concepts of the field, human diversity and cultural competence, public health, community research methods and statistics, collaborative work in communities, organizational and community development and consultation, prevention and intervention, program evaluation, and grantwriting. Research is a large component of both the PhD and masters degrees, as community psychologists base interventions on theory and research and use action-oriented research to promote positive change. Further, students will generally find niches under faculty mentors at their institutions related to local programs, organizations, grants, special populations, or social issues of interest--granting students the chance to have practice doing the work of a community psychologist, under the supervision of a faculty member.