Community Science: Creating an Alternative Place to Stand?

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Abstract

This article comments on two emerging views of community psychology's approaches to the use of research for responding to social problems in contemporary community contexts - (a) the formation of a new field of community science, or (b) the updating of community psychology research traditions. If community science is to become established as a field related to community psychology, its proponents will need to agree upon conventions of epistemology, foci of interest, methods, and standards by which its work can be judged so that it can be distinguished from other human sciences. These articles provide early sketches for what community science might be. However, as noted in this commentary, we need to heed signs of concern about community psychology's continued relevance in public discourse regarding the analysis of and responses to social problems. While this special issue offers some promising responses to the concern of what the field can contribute, the field would be well served if we broaden our dialogue about a renewal of community psychology's commitment to social justice and the need for its perspectives in the practice of research that seeks to address community-based issues in the early 21st century.

Keywords

community science; community psychology; methodology; philosophy of science

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Nearly thirty years ago, a provocative article appeared in the American Psychologist. Based upon insights developed in the new field of community psychology, these authors advocated for a different way of practicing psychology (Rappaport, Davidson, Wilson, & Mitchell, 1975). Their purpose was to stake out new ground for how interventions could build upon community strengths to promote empowerment, well-being, and ultimately prevent problems rather than be trapped in a deficit orientation. The article was also a critique of the tendency of community psychologists to reject models of intervention in word (e.g., criticize medical models), but not fundamentally change psychology's practice (e.g., continue to focus on problems or deficits). In their subtitle, the authors allude to their conclusion about the shortcomings of the young field: "Our places to stand have not moved the earth." They were seeking alternative forms of action that could promote and sustain changes in social conditions in broader communities. It is probably worth noting that the passion of these authors' critique and their optimism about creating "new places to stand" for the practice of psychology are a marked contrast to the manner and substance of most academic articles written today.

Like other community psychologists of the day, Rappaport, Davidson, Wilson, and Mitchell were part of a broader societal dialogue raising awareness about social conditions and debating the appropriateness of different approaches to addressing them. Thirty years later, this transformed dialogue focuses on the role of research in addressing social conditions and issues of social justice. A particular strand of the current dialogue focuses on the appropriateness and relevance of "science" for pursuing these aims. Within community psychology, the role of

science in the field has been a point of discussion since its inception (Kelly, 2003) and has been revisited recently in two conference presentations (APA of 2002; SCRA of 2003), and a special section of this journal (Wandersman, 2003a). Reading the articles of this special issue along with several other recent volumes (e.g., Jason et al., 2004; Nelson & Prilletensky, 2005; Primavera & Brodsky, 2004; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003) causes me to wonder whether our dialogue is evolving into a re-examination of community psychology's practice of both research and action in which we consider our relevance in a new era. Given all of the social, political, and economic changes of the past 30 years, it seems as if we are asking, as Rappaport and colleagues did in 1975, "where are our places to stand" when trying to be agents of social change that might promote well-being, empowerment, liberation from oppression, and prevention of problematic life situations? Do our current places match our values? How can we practice community psychology to be relevant in new contexts while avoiding becoming disconnected from our roots as a field? How can we influence the rest of the field?

In different ways, each of the articles in this special issue contributes to this dialogue. The articles might be clustered into two broad groups of thematic content: (a) those that focus on the relationship between community psychology and the practice of science, and (b) those that aim to articulate conventions for what community science might be. I find that reflecting on the significance of these articles requires me to hold these two points in tension for any consideration of whether conceptualizations of community science might constitute an alternative approach to research that would be consistent with the values and priorities of community psychology. First, I will comment on how community science might be constituted. Second, I briefly think about the relationship between community psychology, community science, and other behavioral sciences. Finally, I reflect on what this discourse about community psychology and science may mean for the field of community psychology.

UNFOLDING COMMUNITY SCIENCE

When viewed as a dialogue, the special issue does not resolve the question whether community science is a new field (c.f., Wandersman, 2003b) or a re-constitution and update of community psychology's view of science (c.f., Kelly, 2003). Indeed the authors of several articles did not appear interested in deliberating how community science might be formed; either they do not mention it or it was not the purpose of their article. Several writers imply that community science is simply what community psychologists do when they engage in research. Perhaps this is sufficient when the audience knows the values, assumptions, and priorities that have guided community psychology, but it is not enough for people outside of the field. To be viewed as a discipline or sub-discipline, community science will need more than an acceptable definition, of course. Community science will need conventions of epistemology, foci of interest, methods, and standards by which its work can be judged. Several articles in the special issue make substantial contributions to these formative tasks.

Definitions of Community Science

Most definitions in this issue draw upon Wandersman's (2003b) initial thoughts regarding a potential field that focuses on community-centered inquiry to bridge gaps between practice and science and improve well-being of community members. Chinman et al. (2005) define community science as

> A multidisciplinary field that attempts to strengthen community functioning by investigating how to improve the quality of common approaches (prevention, treatment, education, health promotion) implemented in real world settings (p. 5).

Tebes (2005) offers a view of community science that is perhaps more specific to community psychology (although not necessarily less interdisciplinary) while also explicitly spanning levels of analysis:

Community science seeks to enhance theoretical and practical understanding of human behavior in community contexts; promote the competence, resilience, and well-being of individuals and communities; and prevent problem behaviors and other harmful outcomes at the individual and community level.

Miller and Shinn (2005) argue persuasively that this potential field needs to include systematic learning from those who are already practicing in community settings rather than only from those conducting research. If this becomes a defining characteristic of community science, it may be a distinguishing feature when compared with other behavioral sciences. As emphasized by several writers, a field of community science would need to be more explicit about (a) describing the contexts of its research (e.g., Rappaport, 2005; Sandler et al., 2005; Sarason, 2003) and (b) the relationships between those who are the focus of research, those using research, and those doing the research so that structures are created to foster an ongoing dialogue between scientists and practitioners (e.g., Kelly, 2003; Miller & Shinn, 2005; Spoth & Greenberg, 2005). The priorities articulated by these authors provide further justification for the study of community processes in defining problems, organizing interventions, disseminating interventions, and adopting programs. In a field not known for brevity in matters of self-definition, Luke (2005) offers a concise definition of community science: "the scientific study of contextualism." While Luke's phrase probably does not capture all the aspects of this potential field, it does point to the importance of an appropriate philosophy of science for the foundations of the field.

Epistemology of Community Science

In terms of epistemological frameworks that could guide community science, this issue makes several important contributions. Tebes (2005) provides an amazingly thorough and concise review of the philosophy of science literature related to the study of contextualism. His synthesis is a new contribution in that it is a relatively succinct justification for methodologies and research designs that take context seriously. Tebes provides philosophy of science explanations for the pragmatic but unorthodox position of grounding community research in specific contexts. He includes practical suggestions for methodological multiplism that can systematically represent different perspectives in efforts to obtain the best approximations of "truth". He describes methods for resolving perspectival discrepancies which often confound attempts to take context seriously. In articulating this framework, Tebes provides an elegant justification challenging the status quo of hypothesis testing as the primary way to advance knowledge and makes dubious the claim that internal validity should be the chief concern of community-based scientific inquiry.

Similarly, Miller and Shinn argue for the need to emphasize external and ecological validity in the process of conducting research. Their focus on identification, dissemination, and implementation of effective programs emphasizes the potential benefits of studying indigenously developed programs and expanding the potential sources of knowledge we consider. It is important to note that Miller and Shinn do not argue for less rigor in systematic research and testing of conclusions, rather their view holds that community science's task (and its contribution to science) is to take our methods and training and apply them to complex settings and systems to document promising interventions and processes that are implemented by practitioners.

Hess (2005) provides an alternative epistemological underpinning for the field that will be new to most readers, but one which I think is ultimately complementary to the frameworks described earlier. Drawing from the work in hermeneutics, cultural psychology, and from several community psychologists (Dockecki, 1996; Bishop, Sonn, Drew, & Contos, 2002), Hess argues that community science could distinguish itself by emphasizing systematic study of research phenomena and how the research is conducted. As represented in hermeneutics, these

aspects of inquiry are integrally intertwined but not often articulated in common practice. Similar to the arguments found in recent considerations in the field (Primavera & Brodsky, 2004; Rappaport, 2000; Sarason, 2003), Hess advocates for the value of discourse analysis, narrative practice, and systematic historical studies in documenting the process of community research and action.

There are consequences to consider when a field seeks to endorse particular positions about its methods and epistemology. Rappaport raises concerns about particular epistemologies being obscured if science is narrowly defined and practiced. He cites several examples of how psychology can benefit from "other ways of knowing" to build a psychological knowledge base—narrative analysis, investigative journalism, literature. Those of us in academic settings recognize the relevance of his warning when we consider the types of activities that are promoted in our departments. However, Tebes' framework may provide another service for the articulation of a community science in its promotion of hypothesis generation and critical multiplism as respected ways of knowing about phenomena. These articles persuasively argue that a strict adherence to quasi-experimental designs in community research appears to be a manifestation of scientistic fundamentalism rather than thoughtful scientific inquiry, and ultimately limits what can be learned.

Phenomena of Interest for Community Science

Wandersman (2003b) has advocated for organizing a science that is specifically community-centered. While his arguments were offered as a means for broadening the scope of community science, they may also be seen as a critique of much of the research in community psychology, similar to the way Rappaport et al. (1975) criticized early community psychology practice. That is, as a field, we aspire to conduct research across levels of analysis, but a preponderance of our findings continues to be rooted in person-centered models (c.f., see the recent review by Martin, Lounsbury, & Davidson, 2004). Perhaps it is not surprising that there are so few examples of community-level outcomes reported in community psychology research or prevention science. Is community science an opportunity to do something different?

I suspect that we have just started to articulate phenomena of interest for community science. The most ready examples of community science cited in this issue (e.g., Miller & Shinn; Sandler, et al.; Julian; Spoth; & Greenberg; Chinman, et al.) focus on (a) prevention, particularly substance abuse & HIV prevention, or (b) dissemination of community-based programs. These examples are helpful illustrations of what might be included in community science, but they do not fulfill the aspirations of earlier definitions and epistemology for a community science that could include addressing oppression and liberation, empowerment, process of social change, and careful description of community phenomena. As we try to articulate what community science might be (or consider the place of science in community psychology), it is probably good reflexive practice to engage Rappaport et al.'s three decades old critique of how our rhetoric may outpace our practice. For community science to contribute something new, it would need to go beyond person-centered models and limited consideration of community-level outcomes. Perhaps it can also fulfill aspirations of some community psychologists (e.g., Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994; Hughes & Seidman, 2002) by taking the challenge of meaningfully considering context and cultural factors in our analyses (Luke, 2005; Rogoff, 2003).

Methodology in Community Science

These articles suggest two primary concerns about the appropriateness of methods for community science. First is the concern about the tendency to use tools that are not adequate for the task. Luke (2005) provides a useful critique of community psychology research and the tendency of researchers to continue to use quantitative techniques which obscure or strip away

contextual information. Luke provides examples of four under-utilized methods that could be useful quantitative tools in representing complex, community-based phenomena with greater sensitivity to their dimensions and relationships in the settings. With the advent of more powerful personal computing resources and accessible software, I am persuaded by Luke's analysis that these methods should become part of mainstream science of community psychology.

The second concern is a tendency of practitioners of "science" to exclude methods that are not traditionally viewed as scientific without consideration of their utility to learn something new. In particular, several authors argued that community research needs to include methods that are not historically within the realm of psychological inquiry. Given that this concern is not a new issue for community psychology (e.g., Miller & Banyard, 1998; Hill, Bond, Mulvey, & Terenzio, 2000; Rappaport, 1990), its continued relevance for our discourse speaks to the power of the broader contexts in which we research and deliberate social problems. While qualitative methods may be more accepted within circles of community psychology, those of us interested in deliberating what might constitute community science would be wise to explicate a position on the types of methods consistent with its approach to research. Several writers in this issue strongly advocate the merits of narrative, ethnographic, discourse analysis, and participatory action research for inquiry in community-based research (e.g., Barker & Pistrang, Hess, Rappaport, Tebes). An explicit integration of qualitative and quantitative methods may be another point of distinction between community science and other social sciences.

Drawing from another research tradition, Sandler et al. (2005) provide a very interesting example of systematic program innovation and dissemination taken from consumer-focused research. They describe a very detailed model for developing, adapting and implementing prevention programs that are effective in local contexts. Those community psychologists who emphasize social criticism as part of community psychology practice may appreciate the appropriation of these methods for disseminating interventions that might contribute to social good. There are many examples of the business world using psychological research for much less altruistic purposes. Identifying methods from other disciplines has a long tradition in community psychology (Kelly, 1990). As Rappaport (2005) suggests, evaluations of appropriateness of methods for community-based research should emphasize the capacity of the methods to generate useful findings and the consistency of the methodological practice with our values.

STANDARDS FOR EVALUATING COMMUNITY SCIENCE

Barker and Pistrang (2005) provide an updated consideration of quality standards for judging the adequacy of community-based research. While this concern has been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Glenwick, Heller, Linney, & Pargament, 1990), Barker and Pistrang's framework of pluralistic inquiry is not a call to do community-based research differently as much as it is an attempt to codify conventions to make its discussion more pragmatic and common. Their synthesis of criteria and principles into four categories is useful for thinking about how inquiry can be evaluated across types of methods (e.g., criteria for all research, for community psychology, for quantitative research, and qualitative research). It is interesting to note that even their criteria for all research include an "explication of context and purpose of the study." Their consideration of the ways that research might be pluralistic calls attention to the need for conventions of evaluating methodology (a) within a study, (b) within a research program, and (c) within a field. To this end, Barker and Pistrang suggest some intriguing markers for evaluating the development of a science that is sophisticated about pluralistic methods (e.g., number of researchers trained in qualitative and quantitative methods, number of published studies, conference presentations, funded grants). Their discussion begs

a question. When might methodological pluralism and standards for judging this research become a matter of competent practice for community psychology researchers and reviewers?

RELATIONSHIP OF COMMUNITY SCIENCE TO OTHER "SCIENCES"

The relationship between community science and other newly formed human sciences (e.g., clinical science, prevention science, applied developmental science) is perhaps the most under-developed aspect of the special issue. It was not the focus of this special issue, but a discussion of the adequacy of these approaches for community psychology research would seem warranted. If community science wants to establish itself, it seems that some distinctions need to be drawn to justify its creation.

As a brief consideration of potential comparisons, I think it would be helpful to differentiate human science fields in terms of (a) phenomena of interest, (b) epistemology, and (c) methods/practice (i.e., how are findings produced and what is done with them). Nelson & Prilleltensky (2005), Rappaport (2005) Seidman (1988), and others have argued that social justice be viewed as an organizing principle for selecting phenomena of interest in community psychology; perhaps this would be a key component for community science. Several authors in this issue advocate for contextualist epistemologies as foundational to community-based research, perhaps distinguishing community science from its cousins. Similarly, wide use of integrated methods and community-centered outcomes could further distinguish community science. Finally, several authors argue that community science could define itself as unique by focusing on how research is conducted and used (Chinman et al., 2005; Price & Behrens, 2003; Miller & Shinn, 2005).

A final resource in considering the potential for community science is some deliberation by community psychologists about their research and current conventions of science. For example, many community psychologists already identify themselves as prevention scientists or applied developmental scientists. What value does a "new" field of community science have for them? What limitations to the practice of community psychology have they encountered in these fields?

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY AND COMMUNITY SCIENCE

At this point in the dialogue, community science appears to an updating and re-articulation of the role of research and science within community psychology. Several conventions would need to be established and institutionalized for "community science" to be considered a field in its own right (e.g., conferences, publications, a professional society). At present, consideration of whether community science might obscure community psychology seems premature (e.g., Rappaport, 2005). Anticipating the possibility, however, is probably worthwhile if it serves to renew discussions about how community psychology can be vital and relevant to promoting well-being and social change in our current contexts. If, as several authors argued, a critical part of community psychology is social critique and a search for alternatives, then a critique of science, and indeed all scholarly inquiry, when combined with proposing alternatives would be consonant with the values and history of community psychology. Miller & Shinn, Chinman et al, and Luke provide good arguments of how we might do things differently with our research methods. Spoth and Greenberg, coming from a different tradition than George Fairweather (1967), link extension service models of outreach to prevention work. Sandler et al. even go so far as to appropriate methods and processes from business and marketing in an effort to develop, implement, and disseminate better prevention programs. These papers describe potential improvements to the practice of community-based research.

I think the more critical phase of the relationship between community psychology and community science will occur when (and if) community science becomes a discipline in its own right. Reviewing the list of contributors to this issue and the previous special section, this discussion has been primarily among persons who have created, shaped, and nurtured community psychology over the past 40 years. If community science becomes its own discipline, it will likely be practiced by people who were not trained as community psychologists. How might community science be constituted when it expands beyond community psychology? Would it diverge from community psychology? Campbell and colleagues document how funding can change the orientation and practices of organizations (and individuals) that have previously been committed to social justice and social action (Campbell, Baker, & Mazurek, 1998). I suspect that some of the concern about the formation of community science is centered on the dissatisfactions with prevention science as articulated by the Institute of Medicine (e.g., Miller & Shinn, 2005) and concern that a field of community science might replicate similar positions. Future discourse will need to offer clarifications about the relationship between prevention science, community science, and community psychology.

WHAT DOES THIS DIALOGUE MEAN FOR COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY?

Over the past 40 years, there have been a number of discussions about the role of scientific inquiry in community psychology. I wonder whether we would be having this current discussion if community psychology was considered part of "mainstream" practice in the fields of human intervention or human-based sciences. I do not mean to suggest that community psychology should or should not be mainstream, rather to observe that we are often not at the center of those discussions. Of course there are individual exceptions, but after 40 years, this leads me to wonder why community psychology has not taken greater root in society, at least in North America. By comparison, one could argue that prevention science has become more influential in roughly 20 years of organization. In the interest of promoting discussion, I want to raise two related possibilities for why community psychology has had limited influence: (a) it has become too insular, (b) the relatively scarcity of established niches for community psychologists in society.

Is Our Field Too Insular?

In the sixties and seventies, much time, effort, and resources were devoted to creating institutions that would represent and sustain this new field of community psychology. A journal was created in 1973 as was the first of the periodic Annual Review of Psychology chapters. A regular biennial conference began in 1987. Many training programs and several other journals have been established. Prior to the establishment of these institutions, the analyses, conceptual frameworks, and findings of community psychology were made in forums that had broader audiences. In an unsystematic review of references of prominent publication outlets for community psychologists before 1973, the most common major journals were the American Psychologist, Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology, Community Mental Health Journal, Professional Psychology, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, or the author's own books. I suspect that publishing in these journals at that time required community psychologists to justify their positions and analyses to a broader audience. I wonder whether this also improved the justifications and provided vitality to the emerging field. Today, however, I would expect that the majority of community psychology authors submit to community psychology or other specialty journals that have much narrower audiences, and likely do not require the same level of justification of our viewpoints and analytic frameworks.

Consider another example of the low visibility of community psychology in settings other than those we have created as a discipline. Outside of our courses, how do students learn about community psychology? In my experience, it continues to be a common occurrence for undergraduates, graduate students, and even faculty peers to be surprised to "discover"

community psychology when they encounter our courses and training programs. While there have been several new community psychology textbooks completed in the last five years, there seems to be little awareness of community psychology by our peers. A brief review of the books on the shelves of my colleagues—Introduction to Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, Black Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology, or Psychology of Women—did not yield a single mention of community psychology and very little work referenced was completed by people I recognized as community psychologists? These are the classes that students often take in preparation for enrolling in community psychology. This is shocking.

I wonder whether the successes in establishing institutions of community psychology have unintentionally marginalized the field within academia and societal discourse. I think we need these institutions and the settings they create to foster the continued practice of community psychology. However, these institutions take time, resources, and energy to sustain. How many of us take time to participate in other professional organizations or community groups not affiliated with organized community psychology? Do we promote community psychology when participating in those settings? While there have been a few examples promoting community psychology across disciplinary lines (e.g., Maton, 2000), sustained efforts appear to be quite atypical. Community psychologists of my generation have benefited greatly from those who founded the field, but I suspect that most of us have not honed the skills of justifying and building community psychology niches in environments that are not necessarily receptive to our viewpoints. Kelly's (1966) description of an ecological metaphor for community psychology also seems to be an apt warning as we see community psychology settings (e.g., training programs) struggling to adapt in the face of cycling resources. In establishing our field, have we unwittingly reduced the number of places to stand that were created 30-40 years ago?

What Niches Does Community Psychology Have in Society?

Think again of those students who have newly encountered community psychology and imagine that they are inspired to use these new insights to develop a career. What jobs are ready and waiting for someone with a community psychology degree? In North America, people with undergraduate psychology degrees occupy many of the entry level clinical and human service jobs. Public health departments are established in most local municipalities. A variety of nursing and social professions involved in community intervention are well established. I am not aware of a single position outside of academia that advertises solely for community psychologists. While our training prepares people to apply community psychology perspectives and skills to many different settings, this requires more entrepreneurial enterprise than is often acknowledged.

It seems that community psychology has an intractable challenge. There are few organizational or institutional settings devoted explicitly to the practice of community psychology. As a field, it is a common practice to view our work as making links between existing systems, often organized around phenomena of interest and opportunities in the systems in which we function. Perhaps we have organized the field at the meso-system level of analysis. That is, our "places to stand" change based upon our activities and opportunities. Although academia provides a fairly stable niche for many community psychologists, even here the points of contact with communities change over time in ways that those who are clinically focused have not experienced. This challenge has been recognized for over twenty-five years (c.f. Iscoe, Bloom, & Spielberger, 1977). I think it calls us as individual "practitioners" and as a field to periodic reflection and renewal of the purpose and mission of community psychology. As we look to contribute to how human problems are addressed, I think it would be fruitful to bring this dialogue about the relevance of community psychology (and the possible contributions of community science) to fields other than community psychology to a much greater extent than it appears we have done recently.

SUMMARY

Is the articulation of community science primarily an attempt to gain money, power, and legitimacy? While it is conscientious practice to consider this possibility, I think this part of our dialogue can better be understood as a discussion about the relevance of community psychology's research in the contexts of the 21st century. It is interesting to note that this dialogue has become multi-generational; the previous special section and this issue include founders of the field, early proponents of community psychology, the students of early proponents, and a graduate student contributor to this issue. I hope that this special issue is an early, focused discussion of what community science might be able to contribute to (a) the creation of knowledge, and perhaps more importantly, (b) the critical awareness of the relationships between those who produce knowledge, those who might use it, and those who are affected by the research.

When this special issue is seen as part of an ongoing dialogue, it reconfirms the observation that community psychology's "critique and analysis can add to and change the practice of science" (Rappaport, 2005). Will "community science" constitute an updated, concise statement about how community psychologists do science? Or will it become a new field of interest for community psychologists, but also people from other disciplines? Regardless of how these developments unfold, I think the discussions will be a benefit to community psychology as we look to make our current places to stand relevant and effective. We are actors in this narrative. Let us see where the dialogue takes us, and let us take the dialogue beyond the boundaries of our discipline.

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