



Alternatives to Theory Development

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Start with the preliminaries: It's good that Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, and Gleason's (2016) paper has been written and that we're responding to it. Discussions of theory are relatively rare in the community psychology literature; for that reason alone I'm glad this is happening.

The paper itself features a thorough and sophisticated exposition of theory and what theory is supposed to do, based on the twin premises that community psychology should be a science and therefore be guided by conventional standards of scientific inquiry. This is followed by a useful descriptive and critical review of three current theories in the field, and then by a particularly compelling and challenging analysis of prospects for future theory development, one worthy of close re-reading.

This paper should be a helpful resource – let's go further and say a benchmark resource – for students, and for professionals who want to acquaint or reacquaint themselves with our current state of theoretical affairs. I can see it as being frequently assigned for graduate school reading, and having an enduring shelf life. All these are positives. But this paper appears in a journal for practitioners, whose daily work may not ordinarily be informed by theory. Are they mistaken, or missing out? Perhaps not. The heart of the matter may come down to:

- What is the actual relationship of current theory in community psychology to everyday practice?
- What should it be?
- What could it be?

These are the determinative questions we should be addressing.

I believe that current community psychology theory has little demonstrated value for practitioners. While it may describe or explain, it is not easily testable, it has not been shown to make helpful predictions, and it usually provides no clear direction for practitioner behavior. As Jason and his co-authors point out, current theories are better

described as orienting frameworks rather than actionable guides. Current theory *should* be useful for practitioners, and *could* be useful for practitioners, if it could either predict or guide. But if it can't, its worth is unproven. I think I may be in essential agreement with Jason et al., though I may also be more comfortable in accepting our theoretical limitations, as will be noted shortly.

Theory may also have low value for practitioners for a different reason - practitioners know little about it, and, perhaps accordingly, don't use it. For whatever reasons, theory has not been well marketed. Hard data are lacking here, but in any case, as a practitioner with some knowledge of how other practitioners operate, were we to ask a random sample of practitioner colleagues how much community psychology theories – those reviewed here, or others – influence their work, I would venture the dominant answers would be “very little” or “not at all.” Instead, their primary sources of guidance would come from their own experience, complemented by what they have learned from teachers, supervisors, peers, and community members themselves.

However, practitioners are not entirely atheoretical. I would suggest they are typically informed by higher-order generalizations – sometimes explicitly stated, sometimes implicit – about the way community life works, again based upon their formal studies and leavened by practical experience. We might call these generalizations *principles*, and I will provide some examples of what I mean.

Back in the 1990s, Paul Mattessich and Barbara Monsey wrote a short manual titled *Community building: What makes it work?*,

with the subtitle of *A review of factors influencing successful community building* (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997). This is a compilation based on a review of more than 500 published research studies, from which the authors derived 28 factors (or principles) of success. For instance:

“Successful efforts are more likely if community goals, tasks, and activities have clear, visible benefits to many people in the community.”

“Successful community building efforts more likely occur when residents have control over decisions, particularly over how funds are used.”

These factors or principles are not theories, nor parts of a theory. But they are higher-order statements intended to guide practitioner behavior, wise guidance in my opinion. I’ve used this manual frequently in classes; students appreciate it; an updated version, or other related compilations, would be contributions to the field. (Cf. also the fundamental principles identified in Jason’s own recent book on principles of social change; Jason, 2013).

A simpler and more homespun example: In community organizing courses I have taught, there is usually a unit on community participation and how to get it. I commonly offer some basic guidelines for gaining participation, along the lines of (1) Set your participation goals; (2) Determine how to reach potential participants; (3) Create a participation plan; (4) Recruit your participants; (5) Maximize the benefits; (6) Minimize the costs; (7) Publicize your message; (8) Use multiple exposures; (9) Evaluate your results; and (10) Adjust, and repeat as necessary.

Again, these statements do not belong to a formal theory. But as they are derived from both the research literature and from real-world experience, they bear theoretical resemblance, though at lower levels of abstraction. I tend to favor the term

“principles”; others might prefer to call them factors, propositions, guidelines, or something else. The labels attached seem less crucial. The key point is that these types of statements have practical value on the ground and are useful in shaping how we work in the community.

Ultimately, the practitioner must focus on what works. I believe then that we would benefit from generating more such syntheses of tested empirical principles; should we be so inclined, we could develop and refine them through further research studies – including hypothesis-testing studies with experimental designs – and codification of experience. These evidence-based syntheses would be valuable for community psychology as a whole, and should be a priority for practitioners and their academic supporters. Here’s an alternative to full-blown theory development, one that may be a preferred pathway to making a societal difference.

Who will doubt that forming theories is hard, especially since community life is inherently complex? If others can develop systematic theories with predictive value, theory’s usefulness will surely increase. Let’s greenlight their work; let’s wish them well. But community psychology theories, as they currently stand, yield limited benefits. For now, given the time most professionals have available and given compelling community needs, I think a practitioner’s full efforts must be to utilize and apply existing factual knowledge to address the pressing community problems of our time.

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