Ecological Settings and Theory of Community Action: "There is Nothing More Practical Than a Good Theory" in Community Psychology

Isidro Maya Jariego
Universidad de Sevilla

Author Biography: *Isidro Maya Jariego*, Doctor in Psychology, is Associate Professor at the Department of Social Psychology at the University of Seville (Spain), and director of the Laboratory of Personal Networks and Communities. He was founder and coordinator of the Master in Psychology of Social and Community Intervention (2010-2013) and coordinator of the Doctorate Program "Community and Social Intervention" (2007-2013). Editor of the journal REDES, Revista Hispana para el Análisis de Redes Sociales since 2002; his main interests are social network analysis, cultural diversity and community intervention.

Correspondence should be addressed to Isidro Maya Jariego, Departamento de Psicología Social, Universidad de Sevilla, Calle Camilo José Cela s/n. 41.018 – Sevilla (Spain). isidromj@us.es.

Ecological Settings and Theory of Community Action: "There is Nothing More Practical Than a Good Theory" in Community Psychology

"There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (Lewin, 1952, p. 169). Since its inception, community psychology has been characterized by simultaneously pursuing the social utility of scientific knowledge and the theoretical value of practice (Lewin, 1946). Theories contribute to community change, while the lessons learned in community intervention in turn contribute to improve our knowledge of social reality. In terms of action research, theoretical models perform a central role in mediating between science and practice.

However, when we ask community psychologists which models they consider essential for community research and action, the picture is very complex. Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, and Gleason (2016) did this exercise, consulting the electronic mailing list of the Society for Community Research and Action. Both researchers and professionals involved in community intervention participate on this list, and the inquiry resulted in a list of approximately 32 theoretical frames. Without being exhaustive in the inquiry, it is striking the number and diversity of theoretical models mentioned. Some of them are not theoretical models. Others are not even part of psychology.

The list shows that, to mediate between research and action, we preferably resort to short-range models, as indeed is proper in social psychology (Collier, Minton & Reynolds, 1991). However, community psychologists also use meta-models, schools of thought, ideas that guide professional practice, ideological frames, and metaphors that guide action, among other conceptual tools. On the other hand, along with concepts that appear in any handbook of community psychology (e.g., psychological sense of community, empowerment, behavior settings), there are also references of sociology, political science, social work, political philosophy, and other areas. Perhaps this reflects the fact that community psychology has been shaped as a pragmatic and multidisciplinary field.

The resulting impression is that there is not a common body of solid knowledge, or at least the common denominator is very small. "Perspectivism" mentioned by Jason et al. (2016) may be revealing some confusion between the epistemological, methodological, and substantive planes among scholars and practitioners. It seems that respect for the diversity of views in the community has been transposed to the coexistence of theories that are immeasurable from an epistemological point of view. This is similar to the emphasis on the diversity of contexts appearing to have prevented the search for regularities of a theoretical character.

Nevertheless, 50 years of community psychology have paved the way to develop the promise of action research: "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action" (Lewin, 1946 p. 35). As I will elaborate below, community research of the last several decades provides a basis for proposing a systematic view of community settings and a theory of the processes of community action and change.

Contexts, ecological levels, and community collaboration

Let us adopt for a moment the point of view of an undergraduate student in psychology. In a subject of introduction to community psychology, the student usually learns that (a) context matters, (b) it is advisable to assess and intervene at different ecological levels, and (c) community interventions frequently include deploying processes of collaboration with the community to facilitate

empowerment. With that background, the student takes a contextual, multi-level perspective aimed at boosting the development potential of communities. That is, the skills they develop are so generic that they could be considered part of a meta-model, an approach to research and action, which can actually be applied in many different professional fields. This *community approach* can be made operational, for example, in the provision of health services, the study of the different stages of the life cycle or even in clinical practice, among many others.

When a group of psychologists met at the Swampscott Conference in 1965, an encounter that is symbolically recognized as the beginning of community psychology, they just reviewed the role of psychology professionals in addressing mental health needs. Since psychological processes (and therefore mental health problems) are clearly connected with the social system, psychologists *should* play the role of community change agents, both to be effective in intervention and to adequately meet the needs of the population. Therefore, thinking about (and transforming) the professional role of psychologists is directly linked to the origins of community psychology.

However, if we open the focus, the changes proposed in the 1960s affect the whole of psychology to varying degrees. On the one hand, many psychological and social issues of interest are incorporated, without any reduction to only mental health problems. Furthermore, the repertoire of intervention strategies is extended beyond individual psychological treatment. So generic skills that we usually associate with a *community approach* can be developed in practice in different professional fields of psychology. For example, nothing prevents a developmental psychologist to paying attention to family *contexts*, using the model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) on the *multiple ecological levels* of human development

contexts, or even implementing a mentoring program to improve academic performance of children, with the *collaboration* of members of the community. We can even see that this approach has also been developed in other disciplines. Concerns about contexts and collaboration are also present in community nursing or in community medicine, just to illustrate it with the case of public health.

To recap, community psychology arises from a reflection on professional practice that produces a meta-model of research and action. However, the emphasis on social contexts and in collaboration with the community is not unique to the discipline, and therefore cannot be considered defining models of community psychology. That does not mean that community psychology has not been able to theorize successfully the role of participant-conceptualizer, empowerment, and collaboration with the community. We return to this point later. What then are the models and the body of knowledge owned by the area?

A typology of ecological settings and a theory of community action

Ecological settings, psychological sense of community, and empowerment are, in my opinion, a good selection of basic theoretical references on community psychology. The three theories that Jason et al. focus on (a) have consensus to be considered as a central part of the discipline, (b) have generated, compared to other models, a larger volume of empirical research, and, last but not least, (c) have enormous potential to build the future of community psychology.

The notion of psychological sense of community that was introduced by Seymour Sarason (1974) has a foundational significance in community psychology. It is a central theoretical axis and is also a core value of the discipline. Empirical research has dedicated a part of its effort to analyze the factorial structure of the concept (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Jason, Stevens & Light, in press;

Jason, Stevens & Ram, 2015; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Stevens, Jason, & Ferrari, 2011), and is preferably applied to the behaviors of neighboring and citizen participation (Kloos, Hill, Thomas, Wandersman, Elias & Dalton, 2012). The studies on sense of community show that natural leaders, behavior settings, and grass-roots organizations have a key role in the process of social cohesion (Maya-Jariego, 2004). Research on neighborhoods – the ecological setting of choice – has shown the risks associated with urban districts where low income, overcrowding, pollution, and daily exposure to violence and vandalism predominate, among other factors (Shinn & Toohey, 2003; Wandersman & Nation, 1998).

However, the research conducted so far also allows us to identify shadow areas as well as the elements that need greater theoretical development. First, community psychology seems to have paid more attention to the subjective experience of community than to the specific contexts in which it develops. In the words of Sarason, the community is a "readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships on which one could depend" (1974, p. 1). So, to improve our understanding of community contexts, we need to complete the assessment of feelings of belonging (or the perception of interdependence) with the objective of describing the structures in which individuals are inserted as well as the properties of the ecological environment (Maya-Jariego, 2004). In my opinion, the study of the regularities of behavior associated with a specific place (i.e., behavior settings), as in network analysis, can respond quite well to that purpose.

Second, community psychology seems to have proceeded to accumulate empirical evidence on factors that are relevant in the community context without elaborating sufficiently on their nature from a psychological point of view. For example, we know that juvenile delinquency is more prevalent in neighborhoods with high turnover of residents and a low proportion of owner occupied housing. Perhaps we can interpret residential mobility in terms of social control, or people's expectations of residing in the same place in the future in terms of commitment and responsibility in environmental conservation. Thus we seek basic psychosocial processes that allow us to compare the between diversity of neighborhood contexts. Although the risk and protective factors' framework has been practical in the design of effective interventions, we need to take another step in the formalization of knowledge to contribute to community psychology from a substantive point of view.

Perhaps this explains why the scales for the assessment of psychological sense of community have been applied equally to classrooms and schools; city blocks, neighborhoods, and cities; or even self-help groups, associations, and political parties (Hill, 1996), regardless of the levels of analysis. Communities are made up of large groupings of individuals who feel a mutual commitment, although not necessarily know each other. They are structures of a meso-social level: they refer to unconscious effects of social structure in the individual and represent the power of indirect relations. Therefore, neither are they small groups nor are they comparable to macro-social phenomena. I think we need to develop a typology of community settings, ecological environments, to guide research in a more systematic way. That entails reference to contexts and settings, which are at the center for concern of community psychology, with more complexity and precision. It also implies a fine-grained analysis of how some contexts are nested in others, and how this translates to the subjective experience of community.

After sense of community, the second concept with possibly more impact on community psychology is empowerment. Partly it is connected with reflections on the role of collaboration with the community, and partly it works as an inspiring metaphor for community action. While recognizing the limits of the definition of the concept from a

formal point of view (Jason et al., 2016), I believe it represents a second line of theoretical development for community psychology, which is concerned with the theory of social action and community. For example, the literature on the implementation of programs has shown that scientific knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for obtaining positive results (Biglan & Taylor, 2000; Goodman, 2000; Maya-Jariego, 2010). The effectiveness normally goes through a process of community appropriation, where public awareness of the problem, social norms, and the degree of community organization are also decisive for the results. Hence the specific contexts may differ in the degree of community readiness for change that is intended with the intervention (Edwards, Jumper-Thurman, Plested, Oetting & Swanson, 2000). The results (i.e., effectiveness), depend on the interaction between the actions carried out (whether planned or emerging) and previous disposition of community context in which they develop. The effective implementation of programs, therefore, is often linked indirectly to the dynamics of community empowerment.

In the tradition of action research, this work has been carried inductively (indicating which actions work under what circumstances). The evidence-based practices have followed a highly pragmatic approach. However, also in this case I think we are in a position to formulate a systematic view of the processes of science-practice transference, the process of intervention, and the dynamics of community change.

Coda

In short, community psychology (a) has provided a meta-theoretical framework on the importance of contextual factors at different levels, both in human behavior as in intervention processes; and (b) it has helped redefine the role of psychologists as change agents, working in collaboration with the community. In this context, and despite the lack of theoretical encouragement of the discipline, both systematic vision of community contexts and a comparative analysis of the effects of community actions (with different people in different contexts) may be able to articulate the theoretical development of community psychology in the medium term.

References

Barker, R. G. (1968). *Ecological psychology: Concepts and methods for studying the environment of human behavior.* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Biglan, A. & Taylor, T.K. (2000). Why have we been more successful in reducing tobacco use than violent crime? *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28 (3), 269-302.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chipuer, H. M., & Pretty, G. M. H. (1999). A review of the sense of community index: Current uses, factor structure, reliability, and further development. *Journal of Community Psychology, 27*(6), 643-658.

Collier, G., Minton, H. L., & Reynolds, G. (1991). Currents of thought in American social psychology. New York: Oxford University Press.

Edwards, E.W., Jumper-Thurman, P., Plested, B.A., Oetting, E.R., & Swanson, L. (2000). Community readiness: Research to practice. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28 (3), 291-307.

Goodman, R.M. (2000). Bridging the gap in effective program implementation: From concept to application. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28 (3), 309-321.

Hill, J. (1996). Psychological sense of community: Suggestions for future research. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 24, 431-438.

Jason, L.A., Stevens, E., & Light, J.M. (in press). The relationship of sense of community and trust to hope. *Journal of Community Psychology.*

Jason, L. A., Stevens, E., & Ram, D. (2015). Development of a three-factor psychological sense of community scale. *Journal of Community Psychology, 43* (8), 973-985.

Jason, L.A., Stevens, E., Ram, D., Miller, S.A., Beasley, C.R. & Gleason, K. (2016). Theories in the Field of Community Psychology. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice 7*(2). pp. 1-27.

Kloos, B., Hill, J., Thomas, R., Wandersman, A., Elias, J. & Dalton, J.H. (2012). *Community Psychology. Linking Individuals and Communities.* Wadsworth: CENGAGE Learning.

Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues, 2*, 34–46.

Lewin, K. (1952). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers by Kurt Lewin*. London: Tavistock.

Maya-Jariego, I. (2004). Sentido de comunidad y potenciación comunitaria. *Apuntes de Psicología*, 22 (2), 187-211.

Maya-Jariego, I. (2010). De la ciencia a la práctica en la intervención comunitaria. La transferencia del conocimiento científico a la actuación profesional. *Apuntes de Psicología*, 28, 1, 121-141.

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of community psychology*, *14*, 6-23.

Sarason, S. B. (1974). *The psychological sense of community; prospects for a community psychology.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Shinn, M. & Toohey, S. M. (2003). Community Contexts of Human Welfare. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 427-459.

Stevens, E.B., Jason, L.A., & Ferrari, J.R. (2011). Measurement performance of the Sense of Community Index in substance abuse recovery communal housing. *Australian Community Psychologist, 23, 135-147.*

Wandersman, A. & Nation, M. (1998). Urban neighborhoods and mental health: Psychological contributions to understanding toxicity, resilience, and interventions. *American Psychologist*, 53 (6), 647-656.