



## Theories in Community Psychology: Do They Matter and Why?

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**Author Biography:** *Raymond P. Lorion* Since receiving his doctorate in Clinical and Community Psychology from the University of Rochester in 1972, Dr. Lorion has been engaged in the design, conduct and evaluation of field-based studies focused on disconnected, troubled and under-achieving youth; overcoming obstacles to educational handicaps and effective learning including developmental disorders and ecological risks associated with high-minority, low-income communities marked by heightened exposure to pervasive community violence. Dr. Lorion and colleagues have developed and evaluated programs to engage communities in initiatives to optimize child and family development. The majority of this work focused on PK-12 settings, instructional staff, students, families and nearby school-communities. Building on epidemiological evidence documenting risks for negative educational, emotional, and health (e.g., substance involvement; STDs and adolescent pregnancy; and exposure to community violence), interventions were designed, implemented and evaluated for their primary and secondary preventive impacts. Since 1989, Dr. Lorion has served as Editor-in-chief of the Journal of Community Psychology.

Dr. Lorion joined Towson University from the University of Pennsylvania to serve as Professor and Dean of its College of Education (2004-2015). From 2006 - 2012, Dr. Lorion directed Towson University's Cherry Hill Learning Zone Initiative focused on applying a comprehensive community-wide approach to turn around chronically low-performing schools in one of Baltimore's most economically challenged neighborhoods. In 2010, Dr. Lorion established the Center for Application and Innovation Research in Education (CAIRE) at Towson and in July 2015 he moved from serving as Dean to focusing full-time on CAIRE's continuing development.

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### Theories in Community Psychology: Do They Matter and Why?

Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, and Gleason's (2016) *Theories in the field of community psychology* challenges community psychology to reflect on its scientific maturation. It is noteworthy that the title of their analysis refers to the *field* rather than the *discipline* of community psychology. Typically, a *field* designates a line of inquiry or area of study *within* a recognized scientific and professional base of substantive expertise, i.e., a *discipline*. I would posit that a *sine qua non* of a science-based community psychology *discipline* would be foundational knowledge built upon accepted theoretical explanations of how the physical, psychosocial, political, economic, cultural, and related salient setting characteristics shape human behavior and well-being. Jason et al. (2016) correctly question whether, after nearly a half century, the scientific community in general recognizes community psychology and the social scientific community specifically as a theory-based discipline. Therein lies their question! To that the current discussion add my question i.e., *do they matter and why?*

In the foreword that I prepared for Jason and Glenwick's (2016) *Handbook of methodological approaches to community-based research: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods*, I stated: "Much is said about the value of the methods for theory-building or confirmation without exactly identifying the theoretical base being referenced. Now and again we see references to "paradigm" without exactly knowing what is paradigmatic about the work or feeling confident that the nature of a paradigm and the breadth of its scientific implications are applicable (Kuhn, 1962). Both "theory" and "paradigm" appear to be stated more as evidence that the work described is truly scientific rather than being presented as the foundation on which the accumulation of information is gathered and its contribution to the "work of normal science" demonstrated. (Lorion, 2016).

In recent comments before the Society for Community Research and Action (Lorion, 2015), I examined the nature of community psychology and the intent of many of its adherents. Specifically, Dokecki's (1992) discussion of the implications of Macmurray's (1957; 1961) analysis of the person-in-community for locating community psychology along the continuum from science to practice led me to question whether our work has been driven primarily by pursuit of

the underlying question "what do we want to know?" or rather by "what do we want to do?" Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive but their differential emphases reflect our priorities. The pursuit of knowledge that expands understanding of targeted phenomena links us to the basic tenets of scientific study, i.e., increasing our knowledge of and ability to predict phenomena of interest be they in the physical or social realms. As discussed below, the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of enhancing our understanding of natural phenomena represents the essence of the physical sciences and, for many but not all, the aspiration of social scientists.

By contrast, work responsive to "what do we want to do?" reflects, in my view, a prioritization of activism over science. So motivated, we engage in specified actions to achieve intended outcomes. This perspective prioritizes outcomes over information! Reviewing the array of methodologically sophisticated chapters in Jason and Glenwick's (2016) recent handbook, I found throughout echoes of earlier debates about community psychology's relative obligations to society and science. These echoes reminded me that the seeds of Community Psychology were planted in the 1960s primarily by university-based clinical and social psychologists during the community

mental health movement's emergence within the civil rights movement. The professional foci of our founders were catalyzed by substantial epidemiological evidence of inequities in access to mental health services; increasing demands for recognition and removal of substandard and discriminatory human services for minority and low-income groups; and emerging acceptance of the public health mantra that no disorders have ever been controlled through treatment but only through its prevention.

For many of our forefathers, community psychology offered a professional pathway for addressing these inequities within the security of their academic positions. Their early efforts altered when, how, and with whom one intervened in the development of emotional and behavioral disorders; sought to rebalance social and economic disparities through empowerment and asset-building initiatives; de-emphasized professional credentials and distinctions between service providers and recipients; and re-conceptualized study subjects into participants, collaborators and even co-investigators. Those same elements led many in my generation to leverage our academic base to engage in applied work focused on reducing inequities and enhancing the effectiveness of educational, mental health and related health and social services for the indigent, the homeless, the abused and the substance involved. The societal concerns of that era allowed us to merge activism with empiricism and thereby contribute to the knowledge base that defines community psychology.

Viewing Community Psychology as built less from scientific curiosity than from social activism is not intended to diminish its importance or the impact of its efforts on mental health, social services, and understanding and engaging diverse communities. One need only recognize the role of leaders such as Albee, Cowen, Sarason, Bloom, Levine, Fairweather and Newbrough to appreciate the challenges associated with

introducing prevention concepts into mental health practices and focusing on ecological and developmental contributions to behavioral outcomes. I suggest that community psychology's intent was to engage in actions that had the potential to change rather than study the status quo. Its unstated assumption was that action would lead to understanding and results would inform theory. If accurate, this perspective hopefully provides context for why, after nearly 50 years, Community Psychology has no focusing theories! Jason et al.'s (2016) call for theories produced at least 32 candidates but no "leading or central theories." Lewin (1951) oft-quoted observation that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" notwithstanding, community psychology finds itself lacking such! Rather we appear to have scores of theories attached to multitudes of phenomena with little consensus concerning their synthetic contributions to our shared ability to understand, predict and thereby gain some control over ecological influences on behavioral outcomes.

Reflecting on the nominees examined in some detail by Jason et al. (2016), I would argue that none, including Sarason's (1974) *Psychological Sense of Community*, meet the scientific criteria for "theory" proposed, for example, by the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, i.e., "... a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world, based on a body of facts that have been repeatedly confirmed through observation and experiment. Such fact-supported theories are not "guesses" but reliable accounts of the real world" (cited in Wikipedia). Theories that would be central to scientific efforts in community psychology must describe, explain, and predict phenomena of interest. Descriptions of these phenomena must be sufficiently consensual to inform hypotheses that have the potential to deepen and expand understanding. Scientific theories are judged by their capacity to introduce control over target phenomena as evidenced by *testable*

predictions of the circumstances under which the phenomena occur. In all cases, theoretical explanations must be *replicable* as well as *refutable*, i.e., experiments must be designed in such a manner that contrary findings supporting the null hypothesis cannot be explained by the theory and procedures must be reproducible independently to establish the reliability of their findings.

That evidence might render a theory false is an essential element of science! Critics of psychoanalytic theory, for example, regularly argued that its capacity to explain any result undermined its scientific validity. Reaction formation explained contrary behavior just as denial or repression explained other findings different from what had been predicted. Each of the “major” theories selected by Jason et al. (2016) must be examined for their capacity to confirm their validity by accurately predicting the circumstances under which intended outcomes will not occur. Findings observed by one community researcher must be replicable by others using identical procedures, measures and comparable samples. Therein, I suspect, lies a significant hurdle for community theories!

In recent years, participatory action research, for example, has been encouraged as consistent with community psychology’s values to engage phenomena in their natural and genuine state. Jason and Glenwick’s (2016) recent handbook contain five chapters focused directly on this methodology (e. g., Kral & Allen, 2016; Suarez-Balcazar & Balcazar, 2016); it is mentioned in far more! To the extent that community residents targeted for an intervention are actively engaged in its design, delivery and interpretation of findings raises questions about the replicability of those findings. Do we know enough about the critical characteristics of settings that we can match communities without confounds? Are those participating in our interventions or explorations as researcher *and* recipient so unique that their characteristics do not allow for cross-setting replication? Can we repeat

work within one setting with a second, third or fourth sample? Can failure to confirm expectations be dismissed as reflecting the uniqueness of a setting and its participants?

Rather than present a laundry list of the limits of extant theories in community psychology, I repeat my opening question about the status of theories in community psychology, i.e., “do they matter and why?” Does community psychology either want or need theory? Reflect on the purpose of theory, i.e., to organize knowledge in a manner that is widely accepted; to clarify understanding sufficiently to offer control over phenomena verified through the consistent replication of predicted outcomes. At its most comprehensive, theory attains paradigmatic status (Kuhn, 1972) and informs which questions are to be asked in which sequence through which empirical methods using which measures and analytic techniques. The value of paradigms is reflected in the breadth of their applicability and in their incorporation of prior and current findings into a whole that enhances understanding, control and prediction. Each of these paradigmatic virtues are inherent to answering “what do we want to know?”

Yet has not community psychology focused on “doing” from the outset? Has it not directed its efforts to reversing wrongs; reducing inequity; revising the balance of power and authority; and returning control to individuals; groups, neighborhoods and communities? If so, does the uniqueness of the situations in which it engages its professional knowledge and practice make these activities less scientific but more responsive and beneficial? From the outset, community psychology’s originators struggled to establish their academic bona fides before skeptical and even adversarial colleagues as they located their efforts away from campuses in “real” settings with “real” people confronting “real life.” One response to Jason et al’s (2016) inability to identify “leading or central” theories in community psychology is acknowledgement that their

absence is consistent with five decades of community psychology's priorities, i.e., engaging with residents in their natural settings and circumstances to do with them what needs doing to improve their quality of life and increase their self-determination! Thus, I encourage readers to delay arguments in support of one or more of Jason et al's (2016) theoretical candidates until they have reflected on whether and why it matters. I urge them to consider how the results of the past 50 years would differ had our science and practice been paradigmatically guided rather than reflective of individual interests, immediate demands and obligating commitment to change! Theories might still emerge that will lead to paradigmatic consensus. If they do, how will our research and practice change? My sense of our literature and practices lead me to counter Lewin's assertion that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" with "there is nothing so necessary as effective practice!"

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