In Defence of a Multi-Paradigmatic Approach to Theory Development in Community Psychology

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Keywords: Theory, Science, Community Psychology, Framework, Paradigm

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It was once said, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (Lewin, 1952, p. 169) and yet Community Psychology (CP) as a practical discipline is beset with a theory-practice gulf that does not appear to be narrowing. The article by Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, and Gleason (2016) plays a commendable role in outlining the challenges faced by community-based researchers and practitioners in developing, testing and utilizing theoretical approaches that could reliably benefit the health and well-being of target groups in a community. Quite rightly, Jason et al. (2016) have acknowledged that theories used in the field of CP should more accurately be termed as frameworks, rather than constituting actual theories, since theories would be expected to offer a comprehensive methodology for explaining and predicting behaviors in a range of settings. And herein lies the problem… Should the CP discipline be aimed at transposing findings, and theories, developed from research conducted in one type of social environment to a host of other potentially similar social settings? Researchers and practitioners alike may experience tensions in attempting to replicate an intervention, based on a theory, with other samples and settings. There are recent worrying trends from one study to show that with "the current (selective) publication system [in academic journals], replications may increase bias in effect size estimates" (Nuijten, et al., 2015, p.172). Likewise, we find there is a tendency in academia to avoid publishing non-significant findings (Franco, Malhotra, & Simonvits, 2014), even though a more honest and transparent approach to theory development and testing in CP would be through registration of hypotheses before a study has commenced, just as Jason et al. (2016) have endorsed. This would certainly be a way forward, but until funding agencies and academic journals are unified in their insistence for all *a priori* hypotheses to be communicated prior to conducting a study, this may be only one way to build theories that are trustworthy in the field of CP.

However, CP researchers, theorists, and practitioners face another, more pivotal challenge to being able to craft theories that can withstand tests of validity, reliability, and utility. Jason et al.'s (2016) article appears to be mainly viewed through a post-positivist "lens," which prizes numbers and the establishment of quantitative trends as the main source for theory development in CP. By reading Jason and his colleagues' (2016) citations of the heavyweights in the philosophy of science field, such as Feynman and Popper, the reader could be left wondering whether theories that have been used by CP can ever attain the same stature as theories generated by the "hard sciences." However, although some philosophers of science are quoted, an important theorist is neglected, namely Kuhn (2012), who proposed that science can progress via a process of revolutions in which paradigms influence the directions and assumptions of scientific enquiry; such paradigms are challenged and some of them can withstand such challenges. My argument here, however, is that we should not be making one paradigm – post-positivism – rule the roost in CP when there are two other

paradigms that can also be influential in their own way. These two paradigms – the constructivist and the transformative (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) - are vital to making progress in CP theory development and understanding how to engage in praxis by unifying the theories with community-based practices (Kagan, et al. 2011). It is through the constructivist "lens" that community practitioners and researchers can better understand another community member's world views and meaning-making and, in so doing, can work towards a theoretical understanding of how these perceptions evolve. It is through the transformative "lens" that researchers and theorists can understand how best to generate meaningful social change through activism and by engaging fully with a stakeholder group and working from an understanding of this group's interests and needs. It is through the transformative paradigm that analyses can be conducted into methodologies of effective social change and how best to implement such change, whereas the post-positivist paradigm has its utility in assessing the extent, or degree, of the changes being made. Each paradigm asks different questions, but they all play a role in seeing a social, political, and psychological phenomenon through different eyes and having a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. By adopting a multi-paradigmatic approach, CP researchers and practitioners are less likely to be akin to the 'blind men' in the well-known parable of "The Blind Men and the Elephant" (Saxe, 1881), in which each blind man believed the elephant was solely like the body part of the elephant that was being touched at any given time

and insisted his interpretation was right. On the contrary, such blind men were all correct in their own way but they were also wholly wrong by insisting that their perspective was the only correct one. Jason et al. (2016) do well in their article to recognize the role of perspectivism and that an understanding of each researcher's or theorist's perspective can be pivotal to effective and accurate theory building.

Towards the end of Jason et al.'s (2016) article, the reader is presented with an insight that argues for privilege and power to be acknowledged in relation to theory construction and research in CP. However, this seems more like an afterthought instead of being integral to how CP research and action should be conducted as a matter of course. There is also an implicit hierarchy in Jason et al.'s (2016) paper, which is evident in the discussion of cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs, but there is little mention of qualitative research methodologies, participatory action research, Fourth Generation Evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), and other mixed methods. By placing quantitative methods on a pedestal, the community-based researcher and practitioner may run the risk of doing research and action *on* a target group rather than *with*, or *on behalf of*, those in a certain target group (Williams, 2013).

By contrast, qualitative methodologies, in particular, could help CP-relevant theory generation through adopting an inductivist approach by drawing from *specific* situational and process-oriented insights that research participants have offered.   From these specific data, researchers may then be able to examine

the potential for transferable dynamics of social situations and interactions being experienced more generally by those in similar settings and with world views and perceptions that are also shared. Disappointingly, Jason et al. (2016) did not notice the role of grounded theory as a methodology in CP; by its very nature, grounded theory is utilized as a means whereby narratives from research participants can be transformed into a set of coding categories that are meant to show interconnectivity, and the process orientation explains how, and why, people act as they do. Although grounded theory is not a common methodology within CP-relevant research, there are good practice examples in which theory can be grounded in the perspectives of study informants (Rasmussen, et al., 2016). This inductivist approach is one way that CP can work with what matters to constituents in a sample group of interest, rather than giving undue prominence to the values and perspectives that the researcher brings to the enterprise. The inductivist approach could be a welcome antidote to the tendency in some studies to use *general* assumptions of how a social world might work and to then use the hyopothetico-deductive method to test out specific hypotheses emerging from these generalizations. This deductive approach rests on problematic assumptions, posing questions of primary interest to the researchers regardless of whether these questions interest those being researched. The resultant methodology that is deployed privileges certain dominant cultural norms and could deprive those in the target group of a voice. For instance, the 'Big Five' (Costa, Jr, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001) is lauded by Jason et al. (2016) as having satisfactory levels of integrity, measurement rigor, and appeal. However, the Big Five is not without its criticisms (e.g. Block, 1995, 2010), not least of which is its reliance on the lexical hypothesis of personality structures being best conveyed by language used by the general public. The Big Five model also rests on the shaky foundations of not fully resolving the emic-etic tension (Dasen, 2012) of striving to find psychological universals while also needing to acknowledge the vital culture-specific influences that may often shape people's behaviors and, in turn, their psychological, emotional, and relational well-being. Models developed primarily from a Western psychological context, such as the Big Five, may often emerge from efforts to constrain its parameters to a predetermined notion of how personality should be experienced and described, rather than from conscious efforts to start from within cultures and draw upon culturally-bound language and experiences. An example of how the Big Five may not be highly valid in all cultures was an effort to translate the model into Arabic within the context of Libya; only three out of the five factors emerged after careful translation and back-translation and confirmatory factor analytic tests of this personality model (Abdelsalam, 2013).

Jason et al. (2016) make pertinent points about three CP-relevant theories that they selected out of 32 theories volunteered in a straw poll survey of users of the Society for Community Research and Action's listserv. It is not entirely clear why those three were chosen, but all three certainly have an appeal in terms of their multi-

layered approach to comprehending complex social phenomena. Certainly, every researcher will have a favorite theory, and it was disappointing not to see Hobfoll's (2001) Conservation of Resources Theory mentioned, especially as it too has a multi-layered perspective by scrutinising the influences on the well-being of people by scrutinizing people as entities nested within a range of social systems. What makes Conservation of Resources theory attractive is that there are a number of hypotheses that have been stipulated *a priori* (Hobfoll, 1998) and these relate to resource loss and loss spirals, resource gain, social support, and resource appraisal. Hobfoll's theory has its roots in Ecological Theory and is it not surprising to see Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal approach as being at the heart of this main focus for Jason et al. (2016), especially as the Ecological Theory has such an intuitive appeal for those working in a range of communities. Jason et al. (2016) recognized the vital role for understanding how the social ecologies of microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems impact people's health and well-being. However, it is also noteworthy that there are other systems of which community psychologists also might need to be cognisant: the exosystem, which has indirect influences on an individual's life, and the chronosystem, which encompasses life transitions and embraces the transitory nature of a person's existence. The chronosystem is particularly pertinent to practitioners in the field of CP because social actors need to be constantly adapting to changes in their social interactions and relationships over time. Overall, the conclusion drawn by Jason et al. (2016), that the "theory" part of the

Ecological Theory is perhaps less of a theory, seems to ring true. This theory (or rather, framework), with its emphasis on interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation, and succession, is perhaps more of a metaphor for how a person's social worlds might interrelate. Yet, metaphors, by their very nature, are not literal representations of a real dynamic; they rather share similar characteristics and, owing to this, we would need to be cautious about the utility of the Ecological Theory in lending itself to the generation of testable hypotheses.

With Sense of Community theory, the challenge is balancing individual perceptions of a community of interest with that of a group's perceptions. Like Ecological Theory, sense of community as a concept seems to rely on taking more than one perspective by encompassing people as individuals and then people as aggregated groups. Empowerment Theory also encompasses this dual-pronged approach by examining how individuals can be empowered by having enriching social environments in order to flourish. Jason et al. (2016) have noted the inherent tensions if an individual's empowerment capabilities are not fostered by an organization and where there could be the contradiction of having an organization that evinces empowerment among many of its members, but not all of them. This dynamic brings to mind processes of group-think (Janis, 1982) and team-think (Manz & Neck, 1997) in which considerable pressure is brought to bear on team members to conform to group norms and ritualised behaviors.

Overall, Jason et al. (2016) have depicted a compelling argument that the CP

discipline is bereft of theories that can withstand clear tests of: being amenable to *a priori* hypothesis generation, possessing unambiguous operationalization of concepts, and being replicable in a wide range of settings and situations. Instead, it is evident from Jason and his team's (2016) arguments that they believe there is much to be achieved before commonly used frameworks and models in the field of CP can attain the status of being theory-like. Where Jason et al. (2016) and I diverge is the method for achieving better quality theories in CP. Although quantitative data collection and analysis, born mainly out of the post-positivist enterprise, can offer a great deal of understanding of the breadth of people's experiences, they cannot offer the depth of insight and the considerable potential for social change that the respective constructivist and transformative paradigms can offer. A better route for theory relevant to community-based researchers and practitioners is through adopting a practice that should become increasingly more common: utilizing mixed methods to research and to embrace multiple paradigms simultaneously. In doing so, tangible and testable theories can be sculpted to form the basis of making a real difference to people's lives.

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