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Community Psychology Practice Competencies: A Global Perspective

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Community Psychology is a unique field of community science incorporating research and action that seeks to promote social change by challenging the status quo and promoting social justice. Accordingly, within this special issue, we challenge our current educational practices in the belief that we could have greater impact if we were more intentional and consistent in the development of professionals of the field who work in more applied positions. It is within these action-focused positions that we expect to most affect change within communities. Our educational opportunities in community-based research methods have been consistent across training programs; however, those competencies alone are not enough to create the change we wish to see.

In addition to our desire to enhance educational opportunities for action-based community psychologists, clarifying the role of a community psychologist, and further creating and identifying employment opportunities for such community psychologists, are of equal importance. The role of community psychologists is not clear. While this lack of clarity has been argued to be an important aspect of the creativity inherent in the role of a community psychologist, clearer and consistent understanding of the qualities of a community psychologist could enhance the ability of the field to advertise for jobs and market graduates. Developing a clearer understanding of the qualities of community psychologist will help everyone of the field to better understand what a community psychologist is and does. This level of clarity can provide a framework upon which to design curricula for students, and professional development opportunities for those already working in our communities.

In response to the gap between existing educational opportunities and the competencies necessary to facilitate community change, the Society for Community Research and Action Executive Council recently approved 18 core competencies associated with community psychology practice in the United States (see Dalton & Wolfe, 2012). As these competencies were under development, there was some debate regarding the inclusion and exclusion of competencies, how the competencies may be used, and to what extent educational programs should be expected to provide students with opportunities to learn all of the competencies. Discussions also included the extent to which these competencies, developed in the United States, were relevant to community psychology practice internationally. For this special issue of the Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice (GJCPP) we invited community psychologists to discuss the role of community psychology competencies in their countries, particularly in relation to the conceptualization and enactment of education programs. Responses were received from Western Australia, Italy, Egypt, and the United States. While this is by no means a representative sampling of community psychology education globally, we are hopeful that it will open dialogue and encourage more community psychologists to comment on how competencies may apply or not in other cultural contexts in the future.

The submissions to this Special Issue provide insight into the range of considerations surrounding CP competencies and highlight their contextual relevance. The first three articles provide insight into competencies in other nations. The first, by Peta Dzidic, Lauren Breen and

Brian Bishop of Australia, provides a critical analysis of the core competencies recently developed. The authors present limitations of the competencies as currently constructed by those in the United States, describes how competencies as defined in the United States are not consistent with good practice of community psychology, and suggest that these current conceptualizations of competencies represent a rift between competencies and ethics. The authors conclude by presenting a case against what they describe as “procedural competencies” and propose an approach to competencies more focused on the values and practice of contextualized community psychology in action termed “virtue competencies.” Perhaps most thought provoking about this article is the contention that reliance on such static competencies does not allow for the learning and skill development required of a community psychologist navigating in a complex and chaotic world that actually requires an ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty.

The second article, by Donata Francescato and Bruna Zani describes specific intervention strategies that have been developed in Italy and Europe, and explores the challenges facing CP education in Italy. The first intervention method is community profiling and network building which is a technique that allows students to explore a local community from different perspectives integrating both objective and subjective knowledge, while drawing on a variety of research methods. This intervention strategy encourages participants to look at a community from eight viewpoints, encourages networking among different groups, and identifies target points within the community for creating change. The second intervention strategy is Multidimensional Organizational Analysis (MOA) which engages members across an organization to analyze it on four dimensions – structural-strategic, functional, psycho-environmental, and cultural. A third intervention strategy is socio-political empowerment training which aims to help students become aware of how different branches of psychology are the product of the historical Zeitgeist and the values and interests of their practitioners. Finally, they describe the use of “Future Labs” as an education/intervention strategy to encourage students to fully explore a social problem and brainstorm all possible solutions. These tools may be of great use to other CP education programs in various contexts.

The third article, by Amy Carillo and Carie Forden illustrates how contextual factors, such as politics, social class, and cultural climate, influence the usefulness of the competencies in Egypt. The article addresses each of the U.S. competencies, their relevance, and even appropriateness in Egypt. Overall, the authors conclude there is a need to emphasize different competencies, and to adapt some to accommodate Egypt’s cultural and political factors. However, the competencies are viewed as relevant, in general, and useful for developing the curriculum and setting goals for the Master’s program. The authors also discuss how the competencies have been helpful for educating students about the practice skills they will gain through their graduate program.

These international perspectives together provide ample food for thought for future development and dissemination of CP competencies as they were developed in the U.S. These perspectives also suggest that there is great potential for the field to continue to grow and develop with increased interaction between community psychologists internationally. We sincerely hope this is merely the first few of many international commentaries on the use and development of CP competencies moving forward.

The remaining four articles are from the United States. The first of these, by Christina Holt, Stephen Fawcett, Jerry Schultz, Bill Berkowitz, Thomas Wolff and Vincent Francisco, describes

the Community Tool Box (CTB), an online resource with step-by-step instructional modules for each of the 16 competencies. The authors used Google Analytics to examine the amount of traffic on the site, and explore patterns of user choices of the competencies. The results demonstrate the worldwide demand for competency building resources. The CTB has been translated into Spanish (language and cultural translation) and 16% of site usage is on the Spanish language site, suggesting that further translation and cultural adaptations in other languages would further extend the reach of this widely used tool.

The second U.S. article, by Chris Kirk and William Neigher, describes the intersection between changes in the U.S. healthcare system and the need for community psychology competencies to facilitate change. The authors show a direct relationship between the competencies that were defined by SCRA and application of the competencies within a healthcare setting. Their goal is to encourage community psychologists to consider such settings for practice; however, it might also be beneficial to disseminate this article to health care institutions to demonstrate the added value community psychologists can bring to the effectiveness of their organizations.

The last two articles from the U.S. are focused on community psychology graduate education. The first, by Gregor Sarkisian and Sylvie Taylor, describes the use of curriculum mapping to integrate the competencies into graduate education programs. This six-step collaborative process includes both students and faculty in the process. Through this process, graduate programs can determine the extent to which they train students in each of the competencies, which courses they may want to further develop or add, and possibly identify faculty from other programs to partner with, or courses in other programs that are relevant. The second of these two articles, by Gregor Sarkisian, Ameerah Saleem, Jeremy Simpkin, Ann Weidenbacher, Natalie Bartko, and Sylvie Taylor, presents a case study of how students in one program learned the practice competencies. Students collaborated with faculty to utilize course mapping, focus groups and reflective writing to gain a full understanding of how learning activities and class processes contributed to learning the competencies.

This special issue also includes a tool developed by Tom Wolff and Gregor Sarkisian. The tool discussed is a Community Coalition Simulation Exercise, which can be used as a teaching tool in the classroom or in a community setting in an effort to learn more about complexities associated with collaborative change efforts and coalition building. As simulation participants take on roles on the simulated coalition, it provides them the opportunity to participate in group dynamics and observe how such dynamics are affected by a group of individuals who come together with a common issue as well as potentially different individual and professional agendas.

Finally, we also included a video. The video, *Working Together: Collaboration of 8 Community-Based Arts-Informed Research Projects on Homelessness*, features members of a collaborative project that was completed in Toronto, Canada talking about their experience. This video is a good example of a core competency in action. In this video, members provided their insights into the collaborative, the projects, commitment to diversity and inclusivity, leadership, and pulling together many perspectives, time, negotiating power dynamics and the results achieved. The collaborative was comprised of eight different projects and members included people with direct experience with homelessness, community agency staff, artists and academics. The groups worked collaboratively to plan and implement a joint art exhibit where they also released a policy report with research findings and recommendations.

The collection of articles demonstrates the utility of defining a set of community psychology practice competencies. They also illustrate how the relevance and utility of such competencies may vary depending upon the country and culture. Additionally, the articles highlight the need to continue international dialogue on this topic which can facilitate sharing of tools and curricula across contexts. The first article points out how much of community psychology in this world is based in the U.S. model. In the future, ideally, through sharing of information and open dialogue perhaps the field will evolve to be representative of more cultures by adopting new competencies, developing new training models, and exploring alternative styles of practice.

References

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