



## **Community Psychology Practice Competencies in Egypt: Challenges and Opportunities<sup>1</sup>**

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## Abstract

The Society for Community Research and Action's proposed competencies for community psychology practice are examined within the Egyptian context, specifically from the perspective of a Master's program at The American University in Cairo. While this program integrates most of the competencies into the curriculum, thesis, and internship opportunities, the emphasis on various competencies may differ from programs in the United States because the program is situated within a different cultural and political climate. Many contextual factors impact competency training, including the current state of development work in Egypt, political considerations with implications for safety, the lack of a clear public policy process, and language as well as cultural differences. Sources of exposure, expertise, and experience for graduate students are discussed in regard to the five overarching competencies: foundational principles, community program development, community and organizational capacity-building, community and social change, and community research. The benefit of examining the competencies from an international perspective is also discussed.

*Keywords: community psychology, competencies, Egypt*

Within the field of community psychology, and in particular within the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), there has been a growing body of literature aimed at establishing a set of competencies for community psychology training programs (Meissen & Hakim, 2011; Sarkisian & Jimenez, 2011; Thomas, Neill, & Robertson, 1997; Wolfe, 2011). The rationale for establishing these competencies includes creating concrete expectations of what skills will be learned in a particular program, educating communities about community psychology as a profession, and defining community psychology as a field (Berkowitz, 2009; Bond, Hostetler, Tran, & Haynes, 2012; Dziadkiewicz & Jimenez, 2009; Stark, 2012; Wolff, 2009).

While there has been some discussion regarding the applicability of community psychology competencies across international settings, specifically in Australia and New Zealand (Australian Psychological Society, 2010; University of Waikato School of Psychology, 2012), there is little information available on the appropriateness of these competencies for community psychology practice in other parts of the world. As faculty members<sup>2</sup> at the American University in

Cairo<sup>3</sup> (AUC), a private university in Egypt, we are in a unique position to contribute to this discussion of competencies. In this paper, we address the applicability of the proposed competencies to practice in Egypt. Additionally, we describe how we tried to build these competencies into our newly formed Master of Arts program in community psychology. There are many similarities between our program and those in the U.S. However, due to cultural differences and a changing political situation, we face unique challenges in terms of the freedom that we have to practice various competencies, and the relevance of particular competencies to the present context. By sharing our experience, we hope to contribute to the understanding of how these competencies are practiced in diverse contexts.

**Community Psychology in Egypt**

In Egypt, psychology is an underdeveloped and frequently misunderstood discipline (Mohamed, 2012), and community psychology is essentially unknown. The people who work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based

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<sup>2</sup> Both authors are Americans. At the time of this writing, the first author had lived in Egypt for three years and the second author for one year.

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<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1919, AUC boasts as “the region’s premier English-language university” (see <http://www.aucegypt.edu/about/Pages/default.aspx>). In 2012, AUC’s student population was 6,652, including both undergraduate and graduate students.

organizations (CBOs) typically do not have a psychology or social work background. Despite the investment in developing and advertising our community psychology Master's program and its relevance to addressing local issues, many of our undergraduate students are not even aware that such a field exists or have misunderstandings concerning the field. Therefore, we have much work ahead of us in educating Egypt about community psychology and the role of community psychologists in this society.

Although community psychology is relatively unknown in Egypt, the time may be ripe for it. The January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011 revolution began as a demand for "bread, freedom, and social justice" and led to the ouster of longtime president Hosni Mubarak and the establishment of free elections. While it has yet to be seen how the revolution will play out over the long term<sup>4</sup>, it nonetheless has created an opportunity for change that could be supported by community psychologists acting on values such as empowerment, respect for diversity, sense of community, and community collaboration. Further, this time of change presents an opportunity, a "space-between," to re-examine traditional paradigms. As Naidoo (2000) points out in discussing the role of community psychology in post-apartheid South Africa, community psychology has a history of emerging during times of political upheaval, because these times call the status quo into question. Finally, as young people, our students may especially have a role to play in moving forward with positive change. Prior to the revolution, youth were seen as young and naïve, while elders, especially leaders, were seen as possessing wisdom and deserving of respect. Following the revolution, youth were seen as having a voice and capable of creating change in their society, while the rulers (or elders) were seen to be corrupt and undeserving of respect. This shift in the role of youth created conflict in society but also led to an empowered generation that desires to create change and is still hoping that change is possible.

### Community Psychology at AUC

Due to the popularity of community development in Egypt, many of our students enter the community psychology program with previous experience in program implementation, as they have often worked as a member of a community service student organization or as an employee or volunteer at one of the many nonprofit organizations in the Cairo area. Additionally, AUC encourages community

engagement at the undergraduate level through community-based learning courses and civic engagement activities. Therefore, students often enroll in the community psychology MA program with questions on how to meet the challenges that they are facing as part of their work life. They are eager to educate their friends and colleagues about best practices and the community psychology perspective.

Our program is designed to encourage students to practice in a way that is culturally appropriate in Egypt while including the psychological theories and principles that are critical to a community psychology approach. The program aims to develop professional skills targeted at the organizational level and prepares students to find employment in a community setting. For example, while students take a course in applied research design and statistical analysis, this knowledge is generally used for community assessment and program evaluation purposes rather than social research. Students also have the opportunity to collaborate with organizations located in Cairo and have chosen to work with communities as part of their thesis projects.

At the time of this writing, we have graduated our first class of five students and are currently working with a class of three. They are bright, inspired by the revolution, and eager to create social change. The AUC student body is comprised of predominantly upper class Egyptians, and our students generally reflect these characteristics in terms of the Arabic they speak, their proficiency in English, which is excellent, and their world views that are more liberal compared to the average Egyptian. In addition to Egyptian students, we have also had two international students, one from Kenya and one from the US.

### Competencies

While community psychology as a field is not well known, there are individuals and organizations in Egypt working alongside communities to create a change in a manner that is consistent with community psychology principles. In terms of training, to our knowledge, the only professionals trained in community psychology are the faculty members working with our program and the students we have trained. Clearly, our experiences color our perceptions and understanding of the way program competencies are implemented and the need for various competencies within the society. For example, as we have lived in the region for a short time, our understanding of the local community is created through discussions with students, our interactions in our travels, and work with community organizations, which include marginalized

<sup>4</sup> At this writing, the first democratically elected President, Mohamed Morsi, has been replaced with a military backed interim government.

populations such as refugees. Thus, our understanding of how the community psychology competencies play out in an Egyptian context will continue to evolve.

In accord with SCRA's competency proposal, our program exposes students to all of the competencies in various ways. In addition to exposure, students are also able to choose the competencies that are the best fit for them in developing additional experience and expertise in their year-long internship and thesis work. Thus, as in all community psychology programs, there is great variation in the competencies that students actually develop some level of expertise. Below, we discuss how we address each of the competencies in our program, and their relevance for community psychology in Egypt.

### **Foundational Principles**

The foundational principles are an integral part of the Master's curriculum. Students are exposed to readings and examples highlighting each of the five foundational principles (i.e., ecological perspectives, empowerment, sociocultural and cross-cultural competence, community inclusion and partnership, and ethical and reflective practice). They are also given opportunities to engage in experiential learning in regard to several of the principles.

**Ecological Perspective.** The ecological perspective (i.e., the importance of person-environment interaction) provides a foundation for the students' understanding of community psychology and working in community settings. We introduce the ecological perspective through their required course work at the start of the program and continue to integrate ecological perspectives throughout their training. The ecological perspective is critical in understanding the etiology of community and social problems and providing sustainable solutions to these issues. Students recognize that while incredibly challenging, an ecological approach is critical to positive change in their communities, and this is reflected in the fact that two students made an ecological analysis the central point in their thesis work.

Students are introduced to ecological research and theory in their first semester through a course entitled Community Psychology and Systems Theory. Throughout the course, discussions revolve around applying theories to relevant topics such as the Egyptian revolution, sexual harassment in Egypt, and housing. As a final requirement, students demonstrate their understanding and mastery of ecological theory by articulating and applying a systems perspective to a social issue of their choice in a paper. Similarly, in

their second (and final) year, students are required to complete a paper in Prevention and Intervention in Communities presenting an original prevention or intervention program that addresses a societal problem (e.g., sexual abuse or the poor quality of education in Egypt) while maintaining an ecological focus.

We have found the ecological perspective to be especially useful in assessing the integration of interventions. For example, for her Master's thesis, one student conducted an assessment of unemployment programs in Cairo and found that while overall, all ecological levels were being addressed, only a small minority of programs dealt with more than one level. Further, there was not only a lack of coordination and collaboration between programs, there was also a real lack of awareness of what other programs are doing (Fahmy, 2012).

**Community Inclusion and Partnership.** The importance of community inclusion and partnership is integrated into multiple aspects of the program. There is a special emphasis on practical skills in courses, such as Community Assessment and Program Evaluation, and internships that provide students the opportunity to work alongside communities as part of local and international organizations. In theory, community inclusion and partnership is at the heart of the community psychology approach. Students recognize that community members are key to successful change and look to them as the experts in their particular situation.

In practice, community inclusion and partnership can be incredibly challenging, even at the level of working with NGOs or CBOs. For non-Egyptian faculty and students, the first lesson in sociocultural competence is that in Egypt it is important to be sensitive to non-direct communication. Often times, instead of directly saying "no," a person or organization will simply not respond. This can lead to confusion regarding whether an organization is genuinely interested in working with a student and pursuing a particular project and having difficulty finding the time, or is just not interested and reluctant to say "no." The language barriers between the supervisors and the community can be challenging, too. While many leaders of CBOs, NGOs, and international agencies speak English, and the students themselves usually speak both Arabic and English, it can be very difficult to provide appropriate supervision to a student when all interactions with community members need to be translated.

The political situation must also be taken into consideration. Many organizations desire to be

associated with AUC, as it holds some prestige an American institution, and this translates into expressed interest for collaboration; however, when public opinion of the US is low, organizations may distance themselves due to negative publicity. For example, after some Americans who worked in NGOs that had been accused of political interference were arrested, a student lost her internship placement because the NGO she was scheduled to work with felt the climate was not “conducive” to her planned project. As public opinion can change very quickly, the relationships that are made with community-based organizations must be carefully monitored to ensure sustainability during difficult times.

Similar challenges are faced in working with community members who may not communicate directly, may be illiterate or speak a different language than English or Arabic, or who may distrust outsiders. As an example, one student designed a Photovoice project with landmine victims in a rural part of Egypt (El Gahri, 2012). His background in community psychology made him aware of the need for cultural sensitivity in dealing with a rural Bedouin population. He also recognized the need to work through trusted community contacts, and tribal leaders as he was likely to be regarded with suspicion as an outsider from Cairo. He collaborated with a local agency to set up the Photovoice and invite participants, and respecting the cultural practices of the Bedouins, he took special care to organize participant groups that were segregated by gender. While the first part of the Photovoice project was quite successful, later changes in the political atmosphere, and a lack of direct communication about personnel changes in the collaborating organization made the completion of the project extremely difficult.

While these types of difficulties can occur in working with community members in any country, they may present special challenges in Egypt, which has a hierarchical culture with a centralized, bureaucratic government, and a history of repression and corruption. To achieve competency in community inclusion and partnership, students must learn to be especially flexible, creative, and patient as they partner with community organizations and the people they serve. Examining this competency from an international perspective provides a broader understanding of the challenges that a commitment to community participation requires, and a stronger appreciation for the skills that are required to overcome them.

**Sociocultural and Cross-Cultural Competence.** Sociocultural and cross-cultural competence may

look different in contexts around the world, and there is much to be gained from examining these concepts in an international framework. In Egypt for example, there is a long and complex history of invasion and assimilation; its location at the borders of Africa and the Middle East has led to a substantial population of immigrants and refugees; and tensions exist between the Muslim majority and the Coptic Christian minority, as well as between Jews and Arabs. Among Muslims and Arabs too, there is diversity of religious and cultural practice. What it means to be “Egyptian” is continually evolving. To what extent Western theories of social identity, cultural competence, prejudice, stigma and discrimination apply here is unclear, and it is crucial that these concepts be critically examined as we seek to train students in this competency area.

An additional issue in cross-cultural competence is that Egyptian community psychologists are likely to be collaborating with Western international agencies, and of course in this case, are attending an American university. Thus, students must be trained in American/Western definitions of professionalism, such as timeliness, preparedness, and follow-through. For example, one student’s internship placement in a German NGO led to some amusing discussions in the internship class about cultural differences in expectations about time.

Further, students attending AUC, which is a private English-speaking university, are generally from the upper class and have different experiences, values, and ways of dress than the majority of Egyptians. Thus, there are unique challenges in educating students who are removed from the everyday experiences that many Egyptians experience in their everyday lives. It is therefore necessary to highlight cultural differences in dealing with privilege by bringing to the forefront the overt hierarchical system of privilege that is an accepted part of Egyptian society and comparing it to the covert privilege of other nations.

However, in spite of these challenges, our students have demonstrated success in bridging differences and building rapport. Through classroom interactions as well as internship work in the community, students recognize how to develop avenues for respectful dialogue through their own actions and learn to navigate difficulties using communication and persistence. The need for cultural sensitivity was apparent in a class project where students facilitated an Appreciative Inquiry at a Sudanese refugee school and encountered challenges understanding the Arabic that the Sudanese parents spoke. Additionally, part of the Appreciative Inquiry involved participants



sharing a time when they were very satisfied with their experience at the school. Interestingly, none of the groups (teachers, parents, or students) articulated an experience in story form. Instead, the participants described general aspects of the school that they enjoyed, such as friends, caring teachers, and strong communication. It was also difficult to know to what extent their positive answers were the product of cultural values of gratitude and politeness.

**Ethical Practice.** Ethical considerations are also less clearly defined in the Egyptian context. Ethics and professional issues are integrated into multiple aspects of the program, focused on exclusively in a required course, Ethics and Professional Issues, and encouraged through consultation and support. In Egypt, however, there are no overseeing professional networks for ethical consultation or support. As an American university, we expect the students to follow the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines; however, there are no binding ethical standards for practice in Egypt.

While ethical codes can be helpful for guiding professional practice, implementing an American set of guidelines in an international context may not be appropriate in all circumstances. Developing ethical competency in an international context reminds us that we must teach students not only how to adhere to ethical guidelines, but also how to be sensitive to the values of local communities (Rudkin, 2003). As an example, a student working with a local agency on his thesis project had the agency insist that participants be paid a small sum as they would be giving up the possibility of a day's work in order to be involved in the project. This led to difficulties with the university IRB, because it was seen as coercive to offer money to research participants with little income. The student and research supervisor needed to negotiate between the agency and the IRB in working out a solution that was ethically acceptable to both sides.

**Empowerment.** The community psychology focus on empowerment provides some difficulties within the Egyptian context, often related to politics. In Egypt, community work is usually synonymous with charity work, and sometimes it is seen as a way to gain political power in a community. Community members are typically described by organizations as "beneficiaries" rather than partners, participants, or even clients. The concept of empowerment has been slow to take hold and remains a challenging competency to develop in our students.

Before the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution, empowerment was discussed as a part of required coursework in Community Psychology and Systems Theory and

introduced through course readings. Nonetheless, it was not encouraged in practice due to the potential for negative ramifications from political powers, who might perceive empowerment as threatening to the established economic, political, and cultural system (Drolet, 2011). During the revolution however, diverse communities were united by a common vision and experienced a period of political empowerment. At the present time, it is unclear what the future will hold in regard to continued empowerment, especially in sectors outside of the political arena. At this writing, the country is still in a time of transition, the political climate has not yet settled, and the situation may remain unsettled for some time to come. While our students are not discouraged from participating in protests and a few were actively involved in the revolution, as a program we do not require or encourage students to participate in causes that may result in physical harm. Thus, there are ongoing decisions to be made in regards to how empowerment will be taught to our students and the impact that it will have on both the community and our program.

In addition to the general political concerns, there are concerns related to empowering specific populations, such as women, and the possible iatrogenic effects of such actions. Indeed, anti-harassment protests in Cairo have been met with harassment (Egypt Independent, 2012; "Egypt Women's Anti-harassment," 2012; Middle East Online, 2012; Paraszczuk, 2012). Such concerns about potential harmful consequences of empowerment are not unique to Egypt. A multi-country study of domestic violence that included Egypt (Kishor and Johnson, 2004) found that the relationship between women's empowerment and increases in domestic violence victimization was complex and that it varied between countries. Thus empowerment may require different approaches in different cultures, and examining it in an international context is likely to broaden our understanding of what it means to be "empowered." For example, two students worked with a newly formed worker's syndicate on the AUC campus, helping the members to develop their organizational and leadership skills. One challenge they encountered in this work was that their efforts to encourage representation of women in leadership were met with great resistance from the women they were trying to involve. This forced the students to think more deeply about the nature of empowerment; should they support the women's decisions to remain uninvolved or push them to change?

While empowerment is approached cautiously, the word "empowerment" is used liberally in Egypt by community development workers and others just as it

is in the US. Programs and services that claim to “empower” people often do not engage in true empowerment approaches. The revolution provided a real life example of empowerment in action; however, the implications of the revolution for real democratic change in Egypt remain to be seen.

### Community Program Development

**Program Development, Implementation and Management.** Community program development is a critical skill in community settings. Students gain an understanding of program development through required coursework that includes a community-based learning component. Guest speakers allow students to better understand the program development process and ask questions related to challenges in regard to development, implementation, and management. As part of the community-based component, students have designed projects or worked with local organizations to build program capacity.

As we continue to reflect on our program and the best way to build competencies in the Egyptian context, we have discussed moving toward increased training in needs and resources assessment. There is very little literature available that is specific to Egypt, and NGOs frequently request assessment when they work with us. Therefore, students considering doing program development as their thesis project are encouraged to start at step one and perform an assessment using a strengths based approach. As an example, one student was interested in developing a program to prevent child sexual abuse, but it soon became clear that before she could develop that program, she needed to meet with community leaders to find out what they were doing and how they were approaching the problem.

**Prevention and Health Promotion.** Egypt has a strong history of implementing prevention programs and has made significant progress in life expectancy and infant and maternal mortality in the last decades (World Bank, 2011). Communicable diseases have also declined and recent efforts are focusing on lifestyle issues, such as smoking and risky driving (World Health Organization, 2012). We build awareness of this competency through required coursework (e.g., Community Psychology and Systems Theory and Prevention and Intervention in Communities) and guest speakers with the option for students to gain experience and expertise through internships and theses about prevention and health promotion design and implementation. Developing competency in this area also requires an understanding of other competencies, as prevention and promotion work is most effective when it is done

collaboratively, is culturally appropriate, and incorporates community participation. For example, a student who conducted her thesis research on drug and alcohol prevention in Kenya assessed potential programs in terms of their cultural appropriateness and incorporation of community participation (Kimunya, 2012).

Despite these strengths, prevention and health promotion can be challenging in Egypt. Convincing communities of the need to prevent problems can be a daunting task, especially in the face of overwhelming social issues and scarce resources. Insha’Allah, “if God wills,” is a phrase commonly heard in conversations and submission to God’s plan is the foundation of a religious life, an attitude that can work against taking preventative action.

### Community and Organizational Capacity Building

Community and organizational capacity-building is relatively common in Egypt and sought after as a desired skill. Students are exposed to various aspects of community and organizational capacity-building through their coursework, Consultation to Non-Profit Organizations, as well as provided opportunities to apply what they learned through course projects. Those who are interested in gaining expertise in community and organizational capacity building are encouraged to design their Master’s theses around collaboration and coalition development; public policy analysis, development, and advocacy; or information dissemination and building public awareness.

Although somewhat true in the US, a difficult aspect of coalition development in Egypt is that many of the organizations also have political or religious affiliations, which impede collaboration. As one student found when she conducted her thesis research on the potential for collaboration among organizations working in a Cairo community, a history of State Security Investigations (SSI) interference in local CBO and NGO activities, particularly in the work of Islamic organizations, led these organizations to restrict their activities to food and monetary aid. This likely inhibited the formation of coalitions (El Sayeh, 2012). In addition, political and religious affiliations can make organizations reluctant to work with organizations that hold opposing views. Other factors affecting the development of coalitions include that the “teamwork” approach is not common to Egyptian culture, and organizational competitiveness resulting from scarce resources leads to less willingness to work together. In spite of these challenges, progress has been made building collaboration among

organizations through the efforts of student led initiatives.

**Consultation.** Students are often quite interested in developing consultation practices upon graduation, and there is a need for consultants to provide assessment, evaluation, and capacity-building skills to NGOs and CBOs. Students are exposed to consultation through required courses, such as Consultation to Non-Profit Organizations, and may gain experience in consultation through class based projects or their Master's thesis. A challenge for American faculty who have experience with consulting in the United States, or who are using American consulting textbooks, is how to translate these consulting skills into an Egyptian context. For example, Egypt has a strong tradition of courtesy that may make it difficult to be open about controversial or competitive issues that have the potential to cause embarrassment. Informal discussions may be preferred to formal reports (Seefeldt, 1985). The complex nature of Egyptian bureaucracy and the network of connections that are the key to navigating it is another challenging aspect of consultation practice, one which Americans who are used to more transparency have little skill in. Further, while we have a strong interest in providing students with training in consultation and organizational development, the time that it takes to organize with a community based training site and the difficulty in maintaining a time frame of work that is within the parameters of a semester (or even academic year) can be incredibly challenging. As we have learned over time, relationship building proceeds at a slow pace, repeated delays occur because organizational contacts have family emergencies, numerous religious and national holidays postpone action, and political unrest causes unexpected disruptions to work.

**Resource Development.** Students have the opportunity to gain hands-on experience doing resource development through required coursework, such as class projects in Community Assessment and Program Evaluation and Prevention and Intervention in Communities and even their Master's thesis. Developing resources can be especially challenging in Egypt as community organization staff members are not generally English speaking and need access to resources in Arabic that are appropriate to the context. To help fill this gap one resource development project involved a group of students creating a resource website for community-based organizations, which included many resources in Arabic. To launch the website, community-based organizations were invited to attend an informational meeting explaining the purpose of the site and requesting feedback from the organizations on further

development. Students also have served as a resource to the community by organizing and conducting workshops for community-based organizations.

**Group Processes.** Multiple aspects of the program serve to provide students with exposure to as well as experience working with small and large group processes. The course Community and Group Interventions, which is taken together with counseling program students, provides exposure to group development concepts and experience participating in a semester long therapy group. Experience in community contexts is further gained through class projects, such as the Appreciative Inquiry conducted with a Sudanese refugee school, internships, and thesis projects. For example, a student employed utilization-focused evaluation in her internship, and not only conducted focus groups as part of that, but formed and led an evaluation team at her internship site.

**Community Leadership and Mentoring.** Training in community leadership and mentoring is available optionally through a student's internship. They choose an organization, community leader, or an expert in their area of interest and work on a variety of projects including capacity building. For example, two students worked with a newly formed worker's syndicate on the AUC campus, helping the members to develop their organizational and leadership skills.

### Community Research

**Program Evaluation.** Program evaluation is in demand by organizations working in a variety of community settings to increase their appeal to local and international donors. Moreover, evaluation is seen as a tool for increasing program effectiveness under the constraints of limited resources. This is especially important due to the cuts in governmental spending and slowed economic growth following the political transition, both of which have made for uncertain funding opportunities. Students receive exposure to and some experience with assessment and program evaluation through a variety of required courses including Community Psychology and Systems Theory and Community Assessment and Program Evaluation. Additionally, students may choose to gain expertise in evaluation as part of their internship or thesis work.

While local organizations are usually aware of the need for program evaluation and desire resources, assistance, and other supports to support their monitoring and evaluation department, they typically develop the evaluation component following program development and may focus on tracking indicators of program output. Although staff may have a desire to



conduct more meaningful evaluations, they often do not know how to proceed. As a result, they are eager to have assistance from our students. Three students conducted community assessments or program evaluations during their internships, and four conducted them for their thesis projects.

**Participatory Community Research.** Although covered in course readings and explored during discussion especially in the course Community Psychology and Systems Theory, participatory community research has not been a focus of the program in the past (similar to empowerment), as it was potentially dangerous for a student to mobilize a community to research and take action on issues of importance. While the possibility of working with organizations that mobilize communities is available through required coursework, such as internships, the program does not require mandatory experience in participatory community research. However, we do include community members in community-oriented projects, and students easily embrace a community centered approach to research and action.

In the coming years, participatory community research may become more likely, and students use collaborative methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry, Photovoice, and utilization-focused evaluation. However, we continue to weigh the costs and benefits for both the students and the community. One instance of these challenges was when a student's Photovoice project with a community on the Northwest Coast of Egypt was continually delayed because of dangerous travel conditions and political issues. In addition, it was not possible for the American faculty advisor to accompany the student to the project site, because her presence would likely have made community members more reluctant to participate, and even might have put the students' safety in jeopardy.

### **Community and Social Change**

Training in community and social change faces similar difficulties as training in community research. Theoretical exposure is common practice through coursework. However, experience may be limited to information dissemination and building public awareness. Students interested in gaining expertise in community and social change may be encouraged to design their thesis around collaboration and coalition development.

**Collaboration and Coalition Building.** As mentioned previously, there is a lack of collaboration and coordination among NGOs, CBOs, governmental and international agencies, and so this is an area where capacity-building is sorely needed. Our

students are gaining experience in collaboration and coalition development primarily through their required thesis projects or internships. As many organizations are working separately on similar issues and often in the same sections of the city, there is a great need for collaboration and an opportunity for coalitions. Three students in our first graduating class conducted assessments of the potential for community collaboration in their thesis work.

While communication with the community is imperative to successful community collaboration, community education, information dissemination, and public awareness can be incredibly challenging in our context. As the official language of Egypt is Arabic, difficulties arise in translating words and phrases used in community psychology into the Arabic language. For example, the word "coalition" in Arabic is associated with the revolution and has a different connotation than Community Psychologists intend. Therefore, care must be taken in determining the appropriate wording for raising awareness, disseminating information, and educating the public and community-based organizations about community psychology theories and approaches. Additionally, as literacy levels vary by community, this must also be taken into account when designing awareness campaigns.

**Community Organizing and Community Advocacy.** Distrust for the foreign perspective can also make community education challenging. This is compounded in Egypt by a xenophobic and anti-Western atmosphere that emerges during times of political unrest. Western based charities and organizations have been accused of plotting to destroy or derail Egypt's political transitions, and several Americans and foreigners have been arrested for allegedly being spies. While at times an outsider's perspective is seen as beneficial and desirable, with such shifts and changes in the political sphere, organizations may distance themselves from American institutions, such as AUC. An association with the West can cause turmoil and tensions and lead to questions regarding the community-based organization's intentions in the Egyptian society.

Additionally, community organizing and community advocacy must be done cautiously. While our students may participate independently, we have typically found community organizing and advocacy to be rather risky, as students have been detained in other fields (e.g., sociology) for simply collecting data within communities. With some frequency, AUC administration has had to restrict community work out of concerns for student safety, again making it difficult to plan for course requirements that

include community experiences. However, some of our students are motivated to engage in these kinds of tasks after graduation, including a recent graduate who is now advocating for an anti-domestic violence policy.

**Community Education.** Community education, information dissemination, and building public awareness are included and integrated within multiple aspects of the program, including readings throughout the curriculum. One way to ensure that students gain experience is to arrange for students to do some activities on campus. For example, students collaborated with the campus counseling center to assess the impact of the campus smoking policy, make recommendations, and design an intervention to build awareness of the policy. Many of our students also have experience working with community-based organizations to provide community education, information dissemination, and building public awareness as part of their personal employment or volunteer work and are aware of the difficulties faced by organizations in the region.

Finally, given our location in the Middle East and the lack of knowledge that many American community psychologists have about the region and Egypt specifically, we spend time educating the international community about the Egyptian context. Students are encouraged to attend international conferences as well as serve as international liaisons as a way to disseminate information about the community work happening in Cairo.

**Public Policy.** Since the revolution, it has become clear what a critical role public policy plays in societal transformation, and it has also become clear that there is a great need for our students to have training in it. As our program does not offer a course in policy, our students are encouraged to take their electives from AUC's policy school. This arrangement is ideal for several reasons. First, much of the policy literature is in Arabic and both students and faculty possess varying levels of Arabic proficiency leading to difficulties even exposing students to policy. Second, most of our students are not as interested in policy as development. Finally, due to the political context, training students in public policy is difficult as the process has been a closed system in the past (i.e., limited to those with connections), and at this time the process of affecting policy is still unclear. During this time of transition, our focus has been on exposing students to public policy initiatives that have been successful in the US or with international policy initiatives and providing students with opportunities to discuss how these

policies would need to be adapted to an Egyptian context as well as the costs and benefits of doing so. One student's thesis work involved an assessment of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in Egypt, a UN policy initiative (Shash, 2012.) We have also on occasion invited local guest speakers who have been successful at policy change to discuss their work with our students.

**Community Development.** Another interesting issue in Egypt is explaining how community psychology is different from community development and how community development using a community psychology perspective is different from traditional approaches to community development. As there is a large focus on community development both within the institution as well as in the community, clarifying how our training is both similar and different to others in the field can be a major challenge. Additionally, offering students courses in community development is considered redundant as there are other programs offering training in this area. Nonetheless, most of our courses focus on examples related to community development. Additionally, internships and theses are often related to community development.

While the community psychology Master's program was originally designed to develop the competencies of CBO staff working in development, the cost of attending a private institution such as AUC is too great for many. However, the program continues to cater to those working in community development by providing workshops on topics of interest (e.g., evaluation) and partnering with AUC institutions, such as the Gerhart Center, to provide trainings on needs assessment and asset mapping.

### Conclusion

Examining the community psychology practice competencies in an international context broadens our understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced in establishing a common approach to community psychology training. Not only does such an examination allow us to see how the competencies play out in a variety of cultural and social contexts, but perhaps it can allow us an opportunity to add new competencies to the list. As our program grows and we implement community psychology more broadly in Egypt (and elsewhere internationally), there will be an ongoing need to re-examine and possibly revise the competencies.

Our program at AUC integrates many of the competencies into our curriculum and internship opportunities; however, the emphasis on various competencies may look different from programs in

the United States that function in a different cultural and political climate. The program exposes students to research and theory, which provides a foundation for learning experiences both on campus and in the community, and builds expertise in a variety of competencies based on student interest. Nonetheless, there are unique constraints due to language, culture, and most of all, the political situation, which continues to remain unstable. We have found that community research and practice in Egypt is evolving; however, there is much work still to be done. The community psychology Master's program at AUC is one avenue for building community psychology competencies in students as well as raising awareness in the community about the benefits of a community psychology perspective. As we celebrate our first classes of students and continue to strive toward a new Egypt, we reflect on the core competencies that will make our students successful whether it is in research or in practice.

At this time, the competencies outlined by SCRA appear to be relevant in the context of Egypt and are useful to the continual development of our Master's level training program. In Egypt, we have found competencies to be useful not only in determining the core curriculum and developing goals for our program but also beneficial in educating students on the skill set that they will possess upon completion of the program. Given the many areas of study available to Masters' level students we hope that the community psychology competencies will provide potential students with a clear picture of the practice skills they will gain through our program. Students practicing community psychology both within the program and following graduation strengthen communities and organizations through capacity building, dissemination of knowledge and skills,, advocating a strengths-based perspective, and interacting in a reflective ethical manner. While these skills are often shared with other disciplines, the approach taken by community psychology is somewhat unique yet shared by community psychologists all over the world.

The future for developing community psychology practice competencies in Egypt remains to be seen. The country is still in a period of transition and shifts in the political sphere affect work in the community as well as relationships between cultures (i.e., American-Egyptian). The potential for new opportunities exists but is not yet fully realized. As our program moves into the future, we hope to continue to attract more international students. These students help broaden our understanding of the competencies and force us to stretch beyond American and even Egyptian perspectives. We also

hope to draw in more professionals currently working in the nonprofit arena as these professionals have firsthand knowledge of how the competencies play out in community programs, and are on the frontline of creating change. As our program grows and diversifies further, we hope to continue to track the role of the competencies for education and the evolution of practice in Egypt.

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