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## **Community Psychologists in the Policy Arena: Perspectives from Four Continents**

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## Community Psychologists in the Policy Arena: Perspectives from Four Continents

Community psychologists working in the policy arena are uniquely situated to improve the quality of life for individuals, communities and nations. Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the policy-related work community psychologists conduct in different parts of the world. This special issue represents a beginning foray into this area, encompassing six articles, one information brief, one commentary, and two book reviews describing the policy-related work of community psychologists in multiple nations across four continents. The articles in the special issue are based on presentations in two separate symposia conducted at the Fourth International Conference of Community Psychology (Barcelona, Spain, June 2012). The two symposia were “Psicología comunitaria y políticas sociales: Antecedentes, límites y posibilidades” (Jaime Alfaro, coordinator), and “Influencing social policy: Community psychology perspectives from four continents” (Ken Maton, coordinator).

The work described in the six articles is diverse, encompassing techniques to influence problem definition (causal layered analysis; critical reflection), policy formulation (coalition building, social advocacy), and policy implementation (collaboration, participatory co-management). The policy areas encompassed include early childhood, climate change, family farming, health care, and youth disabilities. For the most part, the authors bring to bear a critical psychology perspective, emphasizing the need to challenge and contest vested interests and powers, and to support and mobilize citizens and disenfranchised populations. The authors attempt such work as players both within and outside the policy system. In several articles the historical, cultural, and political contexts of the countries within which policy work is embedded are made explicit, whereas in others they are in the background. Throughout, the challenges, the importance, and the potential benefits of practice in the policy arena are abundantly clear. This is evident as well in the information brief included in this special issue, about the development of social consortia, and in the two policy books reviewed, which detail multiple perspectives on policy-related work as well as extended description and analysis of multi-year, multiple-level initiatives to influence policy.

The first three papers in the special issue are conceptual and analytical in nature. The first paper, by Jaime Alfaro, examines the history, prospects and challenges for community psychology in the social policy domain. The paper, written in Spanish, is titled “Psicología Comunitaria y Políticas Sociales: Institucionalidad y dinámicas de actores” (“Community Psychology and Social Policy: Institutional dynamics and actors.”) Based on a review of the available literature from multiple continents, and drawn in part from a recent edited

volume on the topic, the paper highlights the complexities of the social policy arena, involving multiple phases, levels, policy functions, and institutional actors. Three dimensions of social policy are described: 1) function (i.e., ultimate social policy aim); 2) actors involved (i.e., government implementing authorities only vs. interest groups, policymakers, academics, etc.); and 3) decision making process (i.e., technical, rational choice vs. negotiation, conflict). Community psychologists are viewed as having a distinctive and important role in defining problems and solutions, and vying for access and influence in the ongoing processes of negotiation and power enactment that characterize the policy arena.

The second paper, by Brian Bishop, Peta Dzidic and Lauren Breen, uses causal layered analysis to provide a culturally anchored, multi-level analysis of the critical problems facing small family farmers in rural Australia. The paper is titled, “Multiple level analysis as a tool for policy: An example of the use of contextualism and causal layered analysis.” The authors make the case for the use of contextualist rather than positivistic research methods to generate the policy implications of complex social problems. They then describe a case study of the use of causal layered analysis, specifically examining qualitative interview data from rural family farmers at four levels of analysis. The result is an understanding of the problem that transcends the farm management policies generated by city-based policymakers, instead focusing on larger social, cultural and economic factors. Based on this analysis, the authors emphasize the need to address changing values about rural and agricultural communities, and the need for family farmers and their communities to be directly involved in defining the problems that face them, and generating the policies to address these problems.

The third paper, by Thomas Sañas and Cécile Delawarde, presents a critical analysis of the French policymaking structure, with specific focus on the area of preventive public health policies for children and families. The paper is titled, "The geometrical headache of French policies: Can vertical cultures be tilted horizontally?" The first author has a policy insider perspective, working at the national level within a French governmental agency. Historical and cultural analysis is brought to bear to reveal a governmental mode of operation that directly connects governmental programming to individual citizens, precluding any power sharing and influence at the community level. Bringing to bear a critical psychology lens, the authors emphasize the need for a transformation in power relationships, such that local communities have decision making influence in the policy arena. In particular, their analysis underscores the critical importance of developing community-driven, community development initiatives in France, above and beyond the current public health focus on individual level service provision.

The remaining three papers present and analyze case examples in which community psychologists actively contribute to policy formulation and policy implementation. The fourth paper, by Tom Wolff, describes three separate case examples in the state of Massachusetts in the United States aimed at improving health care access, equity, and quality. The paper is titled, "A Community Psychologist's involvement in policy change at the community level: Three stories from a practitioner." The three case examples include working with local communities to build coalitions that enhance community health, working with citizen, health and governmental groups to enhance successful implementation of a new state-level law focused on health care access, and building the capacity of local communities to address social change issues such as systemic racism. The examples illustrate the central role that community psychologists and other community practitioners can play in engaging citizens and community groups as active participants in policy formulation and implementation. The paper views policy influence work as emerging naturally from the ongoing activities of the practicing community psychologist in community context, and the author encourages other community psychologists to write about their experiences in the policy arena.

The fifth paper, by Mark Burton, describes two separate case examples, one a demonstration project that piloted changes in youth disability policy and the other describing activities to influence policies on climate change mitigation, both in the city of Manchester, England. The paper is titled "In and

against social policy." Mark uses a critical psychology framework informed by the tradition of critical social policy and Latin American liberatory praxis. In the first project, the author is a policy insider, working for a government agency implementing the new policy, and in the second he is a citizen activist. The paper emphasizes the challenges involved in influencing social policy, in part due to the complex array of interests and social forces that constrain policy change. The successes achieved are noted as well. More generally, based on a critical psychology perspective, the need for continual reflection on the part of the community psychologist is emphasized. This helps to keep the interests of the disadvantaged central, thereby increasing the probability of bringing about transformative change and, conversely, decreasing the probability that one's efforts serve to maintain the power and the influence of vested interests.

The final article, by Alicia Rodríguez, presents a case example in which a community social psychology team from a local university contributed to the co-management of a government-funded early childhood program in Uruguay. The paper, written in Spanish, is titled "La co-gestión de Políticas Públicas Sociales entre Estado y sociedad civil. El aporte de la Psicología Social Comunitaria a la construcción del diálogo entre actores diversos" ("Co-management of Public Social Policies between State and Civil Society: The Contribution of Community Social Psychology to the construction of dialogue between different actors"). The first portion of the paper reviews the factors that led community social psychologists in Uruguay to incorporate social policy in their training, research and practice. Social policy is viewed as "a stage for the interplay of conflicting interests between actors with differing power resources, in the context of the capitalist State." The case example focuses on improving participatory processes, including participation of the community, by working with multiple groups, including administrators, staff, and families, to enhance their individual and collective capacity. The author emphasizes that effective involvement in the policy arena requires a prior analysis of the "action field complexity", and a resulting intervention strategy which is flexible and dynamic.

The information brief, prepared by Maritza Montero, describes the development of social consortia in Venezuela, a response to the difficulties of the State in implementing a social policy to provide housing to members of low-income communities. The title of the information brief is "Social consortia: A partnership of community agents." After a brief introduction which sets the social policy context,

Maritza describes the structure of a social consortium, which involves collaborative relationships among multiple individuals and groups, including “internal agents” (citizens; stakeholders internal to the community), “external agents” (individuals or groups with needed expertise but external to the community, including community psychologists), and the State. Maritza then presents a detailed case example of a social consortium, describing the development, functions, processes, and results of the Catuche social consortium, the first of its kind in the country. Citizen participation and control over key decision making functions are emphasized as central to the functioning of the consortium, as is active collaboration among all three sectors--internal agents, external agents, and the State.

The commentary, written by Irma Serrano-Garcia, highlights a number of the key themes in the articles and information brief. The commentary is titled, “Social policy: The tightwire we walk.” Irma specifically addresses the issues of subjectivity, context, research and the relationship with the State. Concerning subjectivity, the commentary underscores the distinct perspective brought to the policy arena by community psychologists in different national contexts. Specifically, outside of the United States there is a greater appreciation of the influence of policies in creating and reproducing the structure of social relationships in society, directly affecting the ways populations lacking power are viewed and the consequent universe of possible policy approaches. Irma also underscores the need to further develop and utilize alternative (i.e., non-positivistic) research approaches, the centrality of citizen participation, and the inherent limitations of social policy as a vehicle for fundamental social change in the absence of countervailing, broad-based social movements.

The first book review was prepared by Loreto Leiva. The review is of *Psicología Comunitaria y Políticas Sociales: Reflexiones y Experiencias (Community Psychology and Social Policies: Reflections and Experiences)*, edited by Jaime Alfaro, Alipio Sanchez, and Alba Zambrano (2012). The book is primarily set in Latin American context, and underscores the complex historical relationship between community psychology and state-based social policies in that region. The tensions and challenges for community psychologists who work in the public arena are highlighted, as are the specific community-based strategies and techniques used to

work with community members in the context of state-sponsored programs. The first section of the book sets the stage by providing a history of the relationship between community psychology and social policy, and the possibilities for work in this area. The second section describes specific projects undertaken, including challenges faced, theoretical foundations, practical approaches, accomplishments, and reflections. The final section focuses on implications for community psychology training, organizational challenges, and future roles of the community psychologist. Loreto concludes her review, “I invite you all to dive into this book, hoping that the community psychology principles presented will seduce you, and become a part of your work in the coming years.”

The second book review was prepared by Tom Wolff. The review is of Lenny Jason’s book, *Principles of Social Change* (2013). The book details Lenny’s involvement over the years in multiple areas of social policy in the United States, at the local, state and national levels. The areas of social policy work detailed are youth tobacco prevention, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (a chronic health condition), and substance use recovery residences (Oxford House). Both research and advocacy are central to the social change efforts detailed. More broadly, the case studies are used to illustrate five broad principles of social change work: 1) determining the nature of the change desired; 2) identifying the power holders; 3) creating coalitions; 4) learning patience and resilience, and 5) measuring success. As Tom indicates in the concluding paragraph of his review: “[Len’s] description of the requirements for excellence as a change agent is... wonderful: he notes that these folks will need ‘passion, intuitiveness, endurance, and understanding of principles of social change.’”

Passion, intuitiveness, endurance, and understanding of principles of social change indeed are essential attributes for social policy change agents, given the many challenges to making a difference in this highly contested, complex, and multi-level arena. The current special issue highlights just a few of the ways in which community psychologists have worked to improve the quality of life in their communities, states, and nations through social policy-related activities. We look forward to many more accounts of the social policy related activities of community psychologists from different nations in the years ahead. We have much to learn from each other.