

A Rose is a Rose is a Rose...¹³ Why Community Psychology needs to stand up for its Endorsement on an Interdisciplinary and Societal Ground

Wolfgang Stark¹⁴

Australian colleagues (Cohen, Dean, Gridley, Hoge, Robinson, Sampson, Sibell & Turner 2012), based on the struggle for endorsement of Community Psychology (CP) in Australia, have initiated an important debate which goes beyond the issue of professionalisation of CP. The Australian case raises issues on the professional and political identity of Community Psychology.¹⁵ Based on the German experience, in this paper the process of traditional professionalization is challenged.

The debate, which is going to be published in the next issue of the *Global Journal of Community Psychology*³, is summarized in this abstract provided by Cohen, Dean, Gridley, Hoge, Robinson, Sampson, Sibell & Turner (2012):

“In November 2010, the areas of practice known as community psychology and health psychology were endorsed by the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council (AHWMC). This was a major reversal of the Council’s earlier decision in April that year to limit the endorsed areas of practice to those represented by the other seven Colleges of the Australian Psychological Society. This paper describes the intense lobbying effort coordinated by the National Committee of the Australian Psychological Society College of Community Psychologists and their supporters, which was sustained over many months and led ultimately to a changed decision by the Australian Health Ministers. The story is important for community psychology as it

demonstrates the power of collective, integrated and focused political lobbying, in this case to promote and to inform others of the key contributions of community psychology to health policy, illness prevention and primary care. Without endorsement there would be little incentive for universities to offer postgraduate programs in Community Psychology, which would then choke the only pathway to future membership of the College, rendering it unviable. With no further training offered, and eventually no representative body within the APS, there would be direct implications for the sustainability of the whole discipline and practice of community psychology in Australia.” (GJCPP 2012, forthcoming)

The Australian Case provides a very good lesson for both the status and possible futures of community psychology as an academic discipline and a area of practice. Although it is beyond my intellectual capacity to fully understand the differentiated and advanced situation of community psychology in Australia, I would like to applaud the power and energy of my fellow community psychologists in Australia! Community Psychology in Australia, like in the US, is an important role model for other countries on the status we can reach with an idea of psychology that goes beyond the individual. This example also can give us insights about the potentials and pitfalls for community psychology as an idea and as a discipline.

Community Psychology – the German Experience

Since the rise of Community Psychology (CP) in Germany in the late 70s, CP and Community Psychologists managed to be accepted as a field of psychology, but never reached formal endorsement⁴. In the late 70s and early 80s, a growing number of anthologies on CP have been published, in gradually launched a young and critical field within psychology at German universities. Most of the scholars and practitioners have been connected to Clinical Psychology, some to Social Psychology. Students have been drawn to CP because it provided a more holistic and critical approach to the problems and challenges of individuals, family and groups. There have been close links to other disciplines (Sociology, Political Science, Philosophy as well as Social Work, Public Health, Community Psychiatry) as well as to societal movements (feminist movement, psychiatric survivors) and to international movements (Psichiatria Democratica in Italy). CP gradually developed some special programs on CP in universities (universities in Munich, Berlin, Oldenburg, Marburg).

¹³ Gertrude Stein’s metaphor helps us to view things twice, at least...

¹⁴ Wolfgang Stark, Dr. phil. is Professor of Organizational and Community Psychology at the University of Duisburg--Essen in Germany. He has been one of the founding members of the German Association for Community Research and Action (www.ggfp.de) in the 1980s and has been on the board of the European Community Psychology Association (www.ecpa-online.eu) since its start in 2005. He served as president of ECPA 2007--2009 and is now member of the Task Force on Community Psychology of the European Federation of Psychology Associations (EFPA).

¹⁵ I am grateful to the editors of GJCCP for the permission to pre--print this paper in the ECPA Newsletter 2012

But when the debate about psychological licensing started in Germany in the 90s, German CP stayed back. Although there has been considerable debate, for many German colleagues, CP always has been closer to other disciplines and movements (see above), than to traditional psychological field like Clinical, Social and the like. As a consequence, although German Community Psychologists formed their own association and institutionalized their efforts, the university programs were closed as soon as the faculty members originally launching the movement retired. What seems to be a strategic setback on the one hand, turns out to have some benefits on the second sight: Today, despite the fact that all official community psychology programs in universities are closed, community psychology topics are more powerful than ever: community psychology in higher education is part of the curriculum in psychology in a growing number of institutions. Concepts of community psychology like empowerment or social support have been adopted by classical disciplines like clinical psychology, social work, educational science and many others.

Patterns of Professionalisation

Hence, analyzing the Australian case from the background of our German CP history (and, of course, my individual professional and political point of view), it may be helpful (1) to identify some of the basic patterns of the Australian CP experience, and (2) consequently, discuss some issues on the identity and development of the field called community psychology.

At first sight, the Australian case seems to illustrate the typical struggle for professional endorsement, which always means the struggle for public resources. As soon as public institutions are endorsing a disciplinary field or professional practice, public democratic reasoning leads to an obligation to offer public resources for professionalization to some extent – either to support schools and education, to reimburse services or even to include community psychologists into pension plans at the end of their career.

Therefore, one can see some basic patterns linked to each other in the case provided:

4 there have been parallel developments in other European countries like Italy, Portugal and Britain which lead to more recognition in their professional communities

(1) There are limited slices in the “public cake” and there should not be to many who want to eat from

that cake, because it is rather shrinking than growing. This is a very basic pattern commonly used by politicians and public administrators all over the planet. It delivers the double---message: we have to stand together, because situation is getting worse: something is shrinking, and we don't have the power to do something against.

2) In this case, as a consequence, the “divide and impera”---pattern is applied: if endorsement of professional disciplines is limited, actors will fight each other to be part of the game and thereby forget to see the larger picture (what is really needed for individuals and society). This allows government/public institutions to avoid to start a debate or public discourse about societal problems being the real cause for individual/family/community problems needed to be addressed (you also could call this pattern the “governmental pattern” or “power pattern”);

(3) Community psychologists, although always struggling for the good and well-being of their clients/families in need/communities (and of course this is true respectively for all other psychological disciplines) have to realize that they are – in this case – part of the game. They are fighting for resources for their own discipline that they need in order to be helpful for families and communities in need and which is honourable and will be valuable for communities in need. At the same time CPs tend to be part of the “individualization pattern”: as a discipline, although standing together as individual professionals, they tend to be individualized; as a consequence, societal problems tend to be treated as individual problems: that is why we need special disciplines and services. Individualization both in professional and conceptual terms also bears the danger to somewhat loose contact to the original ideas of community psychology.

(4) Finally, it is always helpful to ask the “systemic question”: What is missing? In this case I could find a strong lobby of official representatives of the discipline, and even a strong alliance between students and faculty members of the colleges. But I missed a particular role for community members or maybe even community activists in the struggle. They seem not to play an active role in the struggle, although they should be one of the major actors in a political game that, at the end, is all about communities in need. So the question remains: what would community members and community activists say?

Based on these patterns identified (of course there may be more) one could state that the Australian case on community psychology is a case on

professionalization of a field, which could be any field in modern societies (like clinical psychology, social work, but also architecture, financial accountancy, or cattle raising). In this view, this is not a case on community psychology at all, because similar processes on professionalization could happen elsewhere.

Community Psychology beyond Professionalisation

As soon as we realize the implications of the process of (and struggle for) professionalization of CP, issues on the identity of community psychology both as a science and a practical field can be raised:

If we share the vision of community psychology being one of the major psychological disciplines, CP looks like an island of science and practice being not very influential within the discipline of psychology. There may be ways to strengthen the process of professionalization, but both the

Australian case and the history of US---community psychology show that professionalization within the traditional structure of psychology bears the danger of losing major parts of CP's identity:

CP always has oriented itself towards a systemic view of social dynamics in the world by integrating individual and group levels, community, organizational and societal levels of analysis. This is why CP identity bears a wide variety of regional and individual scholarly stories, and is trying to integrate personal value systems and scientifically based interdisciplinary research and practice within its boundaries. This is in the core of CP's belief system and has been developed since 30 years.

Especially today the transdisciplinary concept of CP has the potential to be one of the most powerful applied sciences in civil society, if not tamed by professional dynamics. By linking the strengths of different traditional disciplines (psychology, sociology, organizational science, anthropology, educational science, social work and social medicine), spheres of academic science and everyday community challenges of our time, and the analytical view on the past and creative ideas for the future, CP is going beyond traditional applied sciences: CP is not only applying scientific results for praxis, but can add crucial questions and ideas on individual, social and societal issues. By using systematically a transdisciplinary approach as a new challenge in science, strengthening its

political power beyond academic and professional institutionalization, and integrating the "tacit" knowledge of the community and thereby consolidating its identity as a "real" participative science and practice, CP can go steps beyond professionalization.

In order to unfold its potentials, CP as a linking science and practice (Stark 2011) needs to unleash itself from the limits of traditional academic disciplines and professional taxonomies: the social network and social support research in the 70s already brought close collaboration between psychology, sociology and anthropology, and developed tentative links to virtual networks in computer science which are on stake today. The discourse on empowerment processes has been influential for many practical areas in community mental health and social work, psychiatry, community development and organizational science. In social policy the concept of empowerment has been adopted in various legislations and developed as a synonym for innovative approaches to social challenges and the growth of a consumer--- and prosumer---oriented civil society.

CPs traditional values (like social change and transformation) and current challenges today require more than working in a local community and/or improving the social situation of specific groups. While this work will remain an important core part of Community Psychology, the field should empower itself use its competencies to develop social innovations and look at emerging futures by developing shared goals (and take shared risks) by collaborating with other disciplines, companies or other actors in society.

References:

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