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PROMOTING COMMUNITY PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL BENEFIT



Building Strategic Alliances

James R. Cook

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Author Biographies: *Dr Cook* is a Professor at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and President of the Society for Community Research and Action.

Building Strategic Alliances

I recently returned from the 5th Living Knowledge Conference in Bonn, Germany. Living Knowledge is the network of “Science Shops” which are common in Europe and growing in number worldwide.

People from around the world attended the conference, examining ways that universities, and science more specifically, can serve communities. If you look at the Living Knowledge website, you can see the overlap between their agenda and that of community psychology (<http://www.livingknowledge.org/livingknowledge/>). In sum:

“The international Living Knowledge Network (LK) aims at giving citizens access to scientific research.

The network is for people interested in building partnerships for public access to research. Members of the network exchange information, documentation, ideas, experiences and expertise on community-based research and science and society relations in general.”

Science shops are:

“not “shops” in the traditional sense of the word. They are small entities that carry out scientific research in a wide range of disciplines – usually free of charge and – on behalf of citizens and local civil society. The fact that Science shops respond to civil society’s needs for expertise and knowledge is a key element that distinguish them from other knowledge transfer mechanisms. Science Shops are often, but not always, linked to or based in universities,

where research is done by students as part of their curricula – under the supervision of the Science Shop and other associated (university) staff.”

Thus, Science Shops help empower local groups through applied research, often involving students in service learning endeavors.

This was the third Living Knowledge conference I’ve attended, and I have found each to be energizing, because they involve people throughout the world from a wide array of disciplines who engage in community based participatory research. There were over 200 people there, from 34 different countries. Yet, only 2 people affiliated with community psychology were there (Joanna Ochocka and myself). And most people there never heard of community psychology, let alone ever involved a community psychologist in their science shops. In addition, when I’ve asked community psychologists in Europe about science shops, I’ve yet to find one who had ever heard of them.

This disconnection between community psychology and other groups with similar values and goals, and who could be potential allies in our efforts to effect community and system change seems to be all too common. I can think of a number of similar examples:

- Years ago, an official at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, who managed the Community Outreach Partnership program (providing support for universities to help organize and address the needs of low-income communities), stated that she had never

heard of a psychologist doing community organizing and had never previously funded one to do so.

- I've regularly attended "Systems of Care" conferences, which are designed to help change communities to create mental health systems respond to the needs of families, empower them to change their communities, focus on strengths (instead of just pathology), help families engage with their communities (rather than just professional service providers). Yet, I've seen very few community psychologists in attendance (although in recent years more community psychologists have become involved).
- I've attended several conferences of the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, which focuses on partnerships that address health in communities, community-based participatory research, and more recently has explicitly emphasized social justice. Yet, I've seen only a handful of community psychologists at these meetings.

So why are we not present, as part of these broader, multidisciplinary efforts to address the needs of communities? If we, as a discipline, hope to have an impact on our communities and on society more generally, we must do so as part of collaborative efforts with other like-minded groups.

We need to do more outreach to these multidisciplinary groups. We have important skills and approaches to contribute, and we should have people who not only participate with these groups, but who serve as active "ambassadors", creating linkages between community psychology and them. We've come to recognize the importance of

connecting with community psychologists from around the globe, but it is past time for us to become less insular and more interdisciplinary.

We should all work to be better "ambassadors" for community psychology at interdisciplinary groups we are part of. One good example is the recent creation of a community psychology Topical Interest Group at the American Evaluation Association. Serena Seifer, the Executive Director of CCPH, recently reached out to explore ways to build more formal relationships between CCPH and the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA). John Lochman, President-Elect of APA's Division 37 (Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice) and a SCRA member noticed the workshop on "Doing Policy Work as a psychologist" sponsored by SCRA at the 2012 APA, and has reached out to explore ways to collaborate on policy work. Other groups with whom we've had discussions about collaborations include the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and the American Orthopsychiatric Association. I'd urge community psychologists to look for more opportunities, respond to the opportunities we are presented, and do more collaborative work with people from other disciplines. SCRA and other community psychology organizations should also help provide the organizational support to create a stronger presence for community psychology and community psychologists among groups who have similar interests, values and agendas. Community psychologists will always be a small minority among psychologists, so it behooves us to develop partnerships among these groups to increase the impact that we can have.

For more information about the LK Conference, see the Youtube conference video (this is a conference tradition, to video tape during the conference and provide a conference summary at the closing): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdhcEhv-mps>.

You can also download a copy of the latest edition of the Living Knowledge Magazine at: <http://www.livingknowledge.org/livingknowledge/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/LK10-Journal-May12.pdf> and subscribe to this publication.