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Using a Community Psychology Approach in Your Research.

Glenn Williams & Sally Zlotowitz

What is community psychology?

Community psychology has a primary focus on understanding, and working with, people in their wider social context, as opposed to understanding them purely as individuals. A community psychology stance on psychological issues generally acknowledges the role of systems that exist around people relating to place, history, and culture. All of these factors affect people's well-being and behaviour. In this way, it distinguishes itself from dominant psychological approaches that are more individualistic in orientation. It initially borrowed from understandings of the ecology of human development (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and later drew from a number of models and theories including those relating to empowerment (e.g. Rappaport, 1987), and liberation psychology (e.g. Montero, 1998). It uses a multi-layered focus (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) with analysis of: **micro-systems** (e.g. a family or social network), **meso-systems** (i.e. links between micro-systems such as between home and school or relationships between work and home) and **macro-systems** (e.g. social norms, economic systems and policies). This multi-level approach can thus differentiate between various influences that could be exerted on people in specific social settings at different stages of their lives.

Community psychologists regard social exclusion, marginalisation, powerlessness and oppression as having a fundamental impact on people's well-being. Oppression on the basis of demographic factors, such as social class, gender, sexual orientation and race, can create states of learned helplessness, conformity, self-blame and worthlessness. When combined with other factors, this contributes to downward

spirals in well-being and health (Prilleltensky, 2003). Community psychology research and interventions attempt to change these wider influences and systems. The moral imperative to pursue social justice, liberation, and to act as advocates for marginalised and oppressed groups is a distinct aim within community psychology theory, action and research (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

What do Community Psychologists Research?

The range of issues that community psychologists research is far-reaching and ranges from issues of helping people to cope with debt (e.g. Walker, 2012) and supporting climate change initiatives (e.g. Burton, 2009) to helping those who are struggling with chronic physical and mental health problems (e.g. Lovell and developing partners, 2011). Another instance of community psychology work is Orford's (2012) approach to enabling family members who have been touched by addiction to piece their lives together through a combination of individual and collective actions. Community psychologists operate in a variety of settings and roles. They work in universities, local government, charities, and non-governmental organisations (e.g. Case Study 1 below). Some of them may have trained, or be employed as, clinical psychologists, whereas others may be working in counselling, education, sports, and occupational psychologist roles. Although there is not a clearly marked professional role of 'community psychologist' in the same way as there is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist role, there are many psychologists and non-psychologists who use community psychology principles and practices in their everyday work.

Case Study 1: MAC-UK and the ‘Integrate’ Model

MAC-UK is a charity that aims to make mental health accessible to the UK’s most excluded young people, who are often offending or at risk of offending. This goal is achieved by taking mental health out of the clinic and into the community with young people, by young people, and for young people. This charity’s work analyses problems and intervenes *in collaboration* with excluded young people at the personal, relational and collective levels of well-being (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). This work is influenced by the troubling statistic that one in three young offenders had an unmet mental health need during the time of their offence (Youth Justice Board, 2005), with many of them already from a background of social and economic disadvantage (Duckett & Schinkel, 2008). Dr Charlie Alcock, a Clinical Psychologist, founded MAC-UK along with several young people involved or affected by gangs in the community. The MAC-UK approach grew from the bottom-up, and young people co-created the model ‘Integrate’ which is now being piloted in other communities. The model is tailored to small groups of young people, in the context of their peer groups. Such individuals have complex, multi-level needs. More specifically the model is used to:

- 1) Work alongside young people in their own environment by giving them a strong stake in the development and implementation of project activities and then offering ‘street therapy’ to facilitate change if and when young people so choose;
- 2) Provide training to other service providers and the local community to help them to respond to the genuine needs and aspirations of this group;
- 3) Move young people into roles of responsibility when ready e.g. with employment and/or to bridge them into new social worlds; and

4) Evaluate its work to a high academic level in partnership with the Centre for Mental Health, University College London and the Mental Health Foundation.

The approach advocates for the fact that young people are more able to seek help once they have established trusting relationships and a sense of self-worth, and traditional services are often structurally unable to sufficiently recognise this. The model centres on being youth-led and tackling the root causes of emotional distress before it is too late. Therefore, it is able to provide a pioneering, long-term solution to the complex area of youth crime.

In MAC-UK's everyday work with young people there are numerous opportunities for creating systemic change. For example, during housing assessments, a young person often requires a clinical diagnosis of mental illness in order to be allocated supported housing on mental health grounds. MAC-UK staff worked alongside young people and local authority housing staff to question the need for a label. This is especially important because the young person might not receive this diagnostic label because they did not access traditional services. Consequently, the system shifted to consider mental health needs beyond diagnosis. The pilot project has enjoyed considerable success, with over 75% of the participants being currently employed or in work experience (Cosh, 2011). MAC-UK aims to radically transform the way in which mental health services and support are delivered to excluded young people at a national level. At a collective level, the charity works to change national policy to prevent the exclusion of young people, ensuring their voices are heard within government, and that youth offending is considered a public health issue as much as a criminal justice issue.

What brings many community psychologists together is their common aim.

Many of them will strive to:

- Effect empowerment and make issues of power and subjugation more salient (Joseph, 2007), where previously they may have been disregarded or not challenged;
- Foster inclusive practices and principles and to challenge marginalisation;
- Adopt a facilitative approach to individual and social change, which involves recognising that many people have invaluable expertise through their lived experiences;
- Help people to build up networks of support (e.g. to develop social capital – see Putnam, 2000) so that they can act more effectively as a collective to effect social change;
- Identify people's needs and strengths while enabling them to capitalise on these strengths and to be activists for social change as a means of meeting such needs;
- Acknowledge people's distress, and situate this distress within a person's material and social world. Therefore, community psychologists aim to improve quality of life and inequalities that could impact people's life chances (The Midlands Psychology Group, 2007);
- Address inequalities in well-being by using *ameliorative* methodologies to lessen the pain or discomfort caused by a social ill, or by using *transformative* methodologies to equip people with skills to rise above social inequalities, or to work against these inequalities; and

- Focus on prevention and target root causes to social ills by using a *critical* approach that moves away from individualised analyses of psychological problems.

Despite some similarities among many community psychologists, it should be noted that they may operate according to one of three dominant paradigms - the post-positivist, the constructivist, and the critical (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

A **post-positivist** stance would aim to uncover unchanging, objective ‘truth’ about the status of communities. This aim would be achieved primarily through quantitative data collection, and the removal of potential biases. The approach aims to make valid and reliable assessments of social conditions, such as poverty (e.g. Tomlinson, et al., 2008), and to identify a range of causal factors to test out hypotheses. By contrast, community psychologists using the **constructivist** perspective acknowledge that social issues are defined by multiple, sometimes competing, ‘truths’ that are continually being re-shaped and negotiated. In-depth representations of these realities would be sought through deployment of qualitative methods, which may take the form of interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis. The most challenging of the three paradigms is the **critical, transformative** one. By using this paradigm, critical community psychologists’ goals are to address oppression, encourage respect for diversity, and to use critical knowledge to challenge the status quo and promote social change. The critical community psychologist would adopt a range of methods that would be reminiscent of an action research methodology that:

“seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of

pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason & Bradbury, 2007; p.1).

This enterprise may encompass a collection of qualitative and/or quantitative data to conduct research in a highly participative way through involving different stakeholders at various stages of the research process. This is achieved via the setting of research agendas at the beginning of the project. The primary analysis of the critical paradigm is in targeting disempowering and divisive norms, values, and power structures and by replacing them with more all-embracing and inclusive policies and practices.

Strengths and Limitations of Using a Community Psychology Approach

There are a number of ways in which community psychology can be beneficial to your research, but there is also a need for caution. In drawing from our experience of carrying out community psychology-related work and from looking at the literature, we would argue that the following strengths and limitations in using a community psychology approach need to be borne in mind (see Table 1):

Table 1: The Potentials of Using Community Psychology in Your Research

Strengths	Limitations
<p>1. Your research can be action-driven and can be engineered to guide practices, policies and procedures to have a beneficial impact on people’s lives.</p> <p>2. You can display a wide variety of research skills and methodologies to get a better understanding of the entire phenomenon. Many PhD projects are orientated towards obtaining holistic, original insights through the use of mixed methods – community psychology encourages this orientation too.</p> <p>3. By adopting multi-level perspectives on a psychological issue, you will be able to develop an understanding of the indirect, as well as direct, influences that situations, cultures and contexts can exert on a person’s well-being and behaviour.</p> <p>4. The research skills you develop through using a community psychology approach can then be transposed into a range of settings such as in schools, sporting environments, counselling, health and social care.</p> <p>5. If you adopt more critical modes of community psychology, it is possible to give a voice to the marginalised and the oppressed and you may be able to make real changes to the status quo.</p>	<p>1. Community psychology is still relatively new in the United Kingdom as an organised discipline so it may be difficult to get interest from some psychologists who are not familiar with community psychology work. However, given that it is still relatively new, there is a lot of enthusiasm among fellow community psychologists so you should be able to find a supportive cohort of co-researchers in the field.</p> <p>2. Community psychology, at present, does not offer a single career track in a similar way to the more established Chartered Psychologist routes. However this issue could also be a strength, as it provides you with a chance to develop a flexible and versatile set of skills to do research in a wide range of psychology-related areas.</p> <p>3. Some community psychology interventions and research can take more time and effort to create because of the need for authentic partnership-working with, and in, communities. These relationships need time to build.</p> <p>4. Community psychology could be seen as too generic and akin to being ‘all-things-to-all-people’. It is therefore important to be clear about your theoretical and epistemological position that you will be taking in your work in line with the three paradigms mentioned earlier (i.e. the post-positivist, constructivist and critical stances).</p>

Taking a Community Psychology Approach Forward in Your Work

If you decide to use community psychology principles and practices in your research, consider some of the following techniques as ‘tools in your research toolbox’.

Try to:

- Adopt multi-level methods of analysis. Particularly, develop an understanding that the person is nested within a range of social environments - some of which may be disempowering, whereas others may be very liberating.
- Search for opportunities to collaboratively work with stakeholders to create transformational change to systems and environments which are disempowering (e.g. see Fryer and Laing’s 2008 commentary on what community psychologists do in relation to their ‘Disabling Places’ project).
- Encourage stakeholders in the research to reflect on the research process and products – to do so, enable them to co-create the research aims and objectives with you; engage them in the development of methods for collecting data; and let them be involved with the analysis, interpretation and dissemination of the findings. In this way, you will be carrying out research *with* people rather than *on* people.

Overall, there is much to be gained by considering adoption of a community psychology perspective and approach in your research. To get more involved with community psychology and to share experiences with like-minded people, we would encourage you to join the British Psychological Society’s Community Psychology Section. For information about this Section, and about community psychology in general, have a look at the following websites:

- BPS Community Psychology Section website: <http://cps.bps.org.uk/>
- Community Psychology (from Manchester) UK website: <http://www.compsy.org.uk/>

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