

Intervention Strategies If, and When, Community Psychology Goes Global

Jane Cherrington¹ and Robert J. Gregory²

1. 37 Arthur Street, Freemans Bay, Auckland, New Zealand

Phone: 64 (9) 378-6909, E-mail: janecherrington@paradise.net.nz

2. School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Phone: 64 (6) 350-5799 Ext. 20536 E-mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz.

KEY WORDS Community psychology; interventions; global; strategies

ABSTRACT If and as the discipline of community psychology focuses greater attention beyond the individual, and beyond specific communities, the context formed by the global arena beckons. Decisions are made at global levels that influence the local, or even determine what takes place at the levels of individuals and their networks, support groups, and communities.

INTRODUCTION

As psychologists interested in the nature of ideology and the achievement of social change, we generally focus our primary theoretical and empirical attention on those people — out there — who are trying to change — or to prevent change — in one political sphere or another. There may be some value in briefly turning our attention instead to ourselves (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997).

If one sees the social environment as oppressive, then encouraging adaptation to it is to act as an agent of oppression (Levine and Perkins, 1997, p. 205).

A central tenet of community psychology is a desire to achieve social justice through social change (Levine and Perkins, 1997; Newbrough, 1992). It is a desire born in response to dissatisfaction with service models with an individual illness focus and with the understanding that poor mental health is linked to identifiable and alterable social conditions and relations (Levine and Perkins, 1997). However over the past few years there has been an indication from within community psychology that its work, concepts and frameworks, require evaluation in relation to its central goals (Rappaport, 1987; Heller, 1989; Linney, 1990; Kelly, 1990; Newbrough, 1992; Trickett, et al., 1993). The committed and active participation of community psychology as a

professional body can arguably go a long way towards influencing social change (Kelly, 1990). This essay supports the view of Newbrough (1992) that community psychology could become a major actor in social change processes. However as these and other authors suggest, specific issues must be addressed. This essay highlights some strategies through which these issues might be addressed and community psychology's participatory role further developed for the benefit of the global community.

In an initial essay (Cherrington and Gregory, accepted for publication in the *Journal of Human Ecology*) the authors argued that social change calls for the interrogation of existing social systems and values and the means by which they came into being. Highlighting key themes from a range of writers, broad socio-historic and contemporary issues of context in relation to social inequity within the global community was described. In brief, Western capitalist values and ideologies, mixed with many myths, effectively dominate the material and discursive social systems we currently inhabit globally.

Sarason (cited in Levine and Perkins, 1997) states the success of any intervention within community psychology is often dependent on examining values. Veno and Thomas (1996) argue that addressing values is critical. How can community psychology address values? Values are not necessarily identifiable even in single coherent systems (Seligman et al., 1996), and it is more likely that we have multiple value systems that vary according to context. Much psychological research into values, as Seligman, et. al. describe, focuses on self-reports that do not include contextual information and therefore fail to reveal the complexity of value systems. As well as operating multiple values we may also operate unconscious, or as Veno and

Thomas (1996) say, implicit, values, which makes self-reports even more problematic. However, conscious or unconscious, dominant social values are available for interrogation and analysis in discourses, of individuals, members of groups or people in their communities (Panikkar, 1993). If values alter with context, discourses from multiple contexts may reveal some of the complexities of value systems and where overlapping values occur. Neither discourse analysis nor value analysis are easily identifiable components in the projects of community psychology (Newbrough, 1992), yet both are arguably essential to its projects.

As a starting point, what are community psychology's own discourses and values? Thomas and Veno identify core values common to community psychology as empowerment, social justice, diversity and cultural pluralism, cultural awareness, social innovation, evaluation, community development and participation, collaboration and partnership, an ecological approach, systems perspectives, prevention and localisation (1996, p. 25). However as the authors say, these values operate implicitly rather than being made explicit. As Fox (1993) challenges, and as Levine and Perkins (1997) and Seidman, (1988) outline, much of the work of community psychology is focused on the individual. As a result, this focus does more to assist the person environment fit through individual adaption than through radical or even moderate social change. If values are not explicitly declared, then it is unlikely the activities of community psychologists will be measured against them. Fox (1993) argues that genuine activism for social change does not sit easily within the discipline of psychology for a variety of practical, professional, and personal reasons. Therefore it is almost inevitable that psychologists seek and will continue to seek to improve peoples lives by reforming the status quo rather than by radically altering it. Social change is a real challenge to the integrity of the discipline given the values Thomas and Veno (1996) describe. Evaluation of the work of the field against agreed and declared values is required to address such a challenge.

Social change agents contend that energetic community activism that considers alternatives to and seeks disruption of dominant western paradigms if viable alternatives within societies

are to be achieved (Mander, 1991) is required. The critical point made here at least implicitly by community psychology is that these viable alternatives should come from within communities themselves (Bishop and Symes, 1996; Levine and Perkins, 1997). But perhaps we need to begin (Berry, 1988) with the caution that "community" can only become active if the members of a community understand and fully explain the situation internally, i.e., to itself. So while the need to start with values is important, the engagement of community awareness must occur for any assessment of values to take place.

A key focus for intervention then, is one that yields strategic ways to examine and explain values and the raising of consciousness within communities. This approach might enable (value-aware) systems interrogation and alternatives to be considered.

Gregory (1999) offers an excellent process model of community psychology for community psychologists to use when they are looking for problems within communities of which they are not an integral part. How do we operate though, when addressing systems affecting the broader global community, when community psychology is inherently a part and is not coming in from outside. This is a raising of awareness that has the potential to be challenging. Is community psychology not as involved in social change as it might be because we are failing to fully explain the global or local situation to ourselves? To frame community psychology as being "inside" social problems can radically alter the character of the role and place this discipline has in planning and carrying out interventions. In the global community we need to recognise that as a discipline, community psychology is part of the community, and part of the discourses that actively construct its culture. Community psychology is also, potentially, a form of intervention or a form of what assists in maintaining the status quo. Assessment and evaluation of community psychology from the perspective of its paradoxical role as of the system and as an intervention desiring to change the system is needed. Part of what that evaluation needs to consider is the position of power, whether perceived or real, that community psychology holds within the global (or local) community.

To stimulate any debate about social values, communication is required. In democratic

Western society, values, ideas and politics are for the majority and for most of the time, communicated through mass communication channels (Ellul, 1965). Mass communications demand messages that are reduced and condensed, sound bytes to fit the technology (and attention span of the viewers).

Ellul argues that the processes of mass communication lead to the use of simple images, stereotypes, signifiers and slogans to communicate amorphous and/or complex ideas to create prepared opinions and deliver thinking in the form of norms, standardised ideas, and codified social, political and moral standards to individuals. Whilst we now understand that audiences may read mass communications oppositionally, the majority of messages and presentations of information have a dominant or preferred reading that operates to constrain audience interpretation to a large extent (Hall, 1992). The ideas that are present in mass communications are consumed, whether easily or not, without necessarily realising the subtextual or implicit values attached (Berry, 1988). Mass communication in this context does not simply mean media but also refers to broader social structures and systems (of education, media, government, medicine, law) that deliver standardised information, procedures and even layouts (Ellul, 1965).

The significance of existing systems of communication is that (somewhat dauntingly) when we consider strategies for raising awareness we must also strategize how to address communities in this context of their dominant communications systems. If we as community psychologists develop communication strategies that operate as Ellul describes, using easily condensed messages to generate initial awareness, the process of winning consent arguably leaves intact the status quo of the values inherent in such a system that is in itself part of the problem. What is problematic in mass communications is that they create a false sense of participation and promote a false democracy (Ellul, 1965). To replicate an undemocratic process that does not genuinely and critically engage communities, albeit in pursuit of socially desirable outcomes, still does not address the fundamental role of the communications system itself in creating, maintaining, or extending existing social conditions. Such ethical concerns are challenging, but can they preclude the

possibilities mass communications might offer? If they do, how do we operate the system differently?

If our audience is the community of our fellow practitioners, what are their dominant systems (and existing resources) and how might those be strategically employed?

Media, from mass to the textbooks and journals of academia, is a key area for community psychology and is often touched on as a vehicle for addressing social change both in case studies (Levine and Perkins, 1997) and in theory (Glenwick and Jason, 1984). However, theories of the operation and impact of communications systems in challenging or perpetuating social inequities are found in media studies (Wilkins, 2000) rather than in community psychology. As Wilkins says, the ability of communications interventions to address social problems is constrained by normative climates and political-economic structures, in other words broader material and discursive systems. This reiterates the need for the work of community psychology to include conceptual frameworks that can and do incorporate these elements. But it also highlights what Kelly (1990) cites as necessary for the field and that is inter- and multidisciplinary co-operation. Media studies have progressed to an area of some importance to community psychology, one that should be brought into its work. Much may be gained from examining the work already well under way in the field.

Within writings that consider alternatives to the dominant western structural model of communications, there is an emphasis on the need to recognise plural perspectives and to develop the local within culture (Hall, 1989). This perspective is very much in line with the thinking of community psychology. Yet the society in which we westerners exist is a mass society, the very apparatus of mass communications in it promotes the global (Mander, 1991). This is why community psychology has to operate on both local and global perspectives when conceptualising social change.

Mander (1991) in his reporting on communications processes in Indian nations does offer an alternative. He describes, in essence, a decentralised local process of community engagement, in which information is shared and processes of decision-making involve, consider and reflect the needs of a whole community.

Some parallels can be found between these models of community functioning and those described by Linney (1990) in self-help and activist networks like the Citizens Clearinghouse for Waste. Independent local operation and decision making is replicated across networks that can also co-operate nationally. In the model Mander (1991) describes, any blocks to the process of reflecting local needs at national levels see a return to the local. The process continues until problems are resolved or action is not taken. This model, as Mander identifies, has three critical components that make it work. The first is that identifiable and representative communities of interest are established, the second is that communities are grounded in a common value set and the third is that a real disregard for the speed at which the process occurs is present.

Another method of altering the way in which structures and systems are used is suggested by Esteva (1993), who outlines a living example of an alternative strategy within the Tepito community in Mexico City. The Tepito community uses existing systems and processes as a token validation of what has already been determined locally by all the individuals involved. But again, as Esteva outlines, this requires an awakened level of political awareness, local structures of communications within the communities involved and a commitment to a shared set of values that underpin the logic of such a process. The Tepito community Esteva (1993) describes became political and developed such structures and indeed, a sense of its own community, through a set of circumstances that positioned it to either resist or disintegrate under pressure from outside political forces. Esteva's example highlights a critical dilemma, for new processes and pace to be considered we have to ask how a community can be identified and made conscious that there are alternatives worth protecting and forces to resist?

The answer of course must be to actively focus on those forces that are positioning communities to both develop and to resist or disintegrate. Under conditions of sufficient stress, a shared and common concern can devastate a community or cause a strong psychological sense of community to develop. But what might such concerns be for the global community and how can they be brought to the attention of communities at a meaningful level

of engagement?

The ecological and action based perspectives of community psychology (Levin and Perkins, 1997) as well as the identified values of community psychology (Veno and Thomas, 1996) seem complementary with the goals of groups in society promoting social justice through global activism for equitable and sustainable communities. Such groups operate locally from a platform of local and global relevance through which a psychological sense of community and urgency about the need for alternatives can develop. However these groups, even at national and international levels, frequently reflect specific interest bases. It would appear that a framework of operation for a broader platform could be of benefit. This idea has been taken up by activists within the international forum on globalisation who are suggesting just such a platform is required first country by country, but ultimately links internationally (Danaher, 2001). Connecting to key stakeholders to bring them together on core issues affecting communities again is a very compatible part of the process of intervention for community psychology (Heller, 1989). However an intervention of this kind holds issues for community psychology. Activism for social change by groups that recognise the global interdependency of ecological and human systems is overtly political. Science, and within the fold of science, psychology, often highlights the value of objectivity in its work and operates with the notion of being separate from or entirely removed from subjective values (Weiten, 1995). Although community psychology does recognise (explicitly or at least implicitly) the subjectivity of its work (Veno and Thomas, 1996), that does not make the discipline actively political. The core aim of community psychology is very political but to work directly for radical social change requires an explicit declaration of values, a commitment to community action and direct challenges to the most powerful groups in societies, including that of its own communities of psychology and science.

The discourses on social activism for sustainable futures has arguably been dominated by a discourse on environmentalism (Berry, 1988). Implicit in Berry's writing is that there are other discourses that require elevation. Elevation and integration of human discourses with environmental understanding into a genuine whole of ecology is needed. This idea does

seem to offer a strong role for community psychology. A push for developing this discourse has to include turning to and involving the originators of dominant discourses that need to be challenged. Science has participated in processes that lead to the discourses of environmentally dominant humans. It has also been active in the construction of a range of dominant and oppressive discourses that impact directly on individuals, communities and their environments (Panikkar, 1993). Strategies to work within the communities of science need to be developed because they are critical to the development of knowledge. Who is in a better position to undertake this than one of their (our) own? Many might argue that community psychology is more humanities than science and yet the name of science is invoked often enough to suggest the field has not divested itself of fraternity to the field. For example, see Rappaport's (1987) argument for the development in the field of theory, where he argues that without theory a field cannot last long as a scientific enterprise (p. 122).

As Levine and Perkins (1997) identify, it is not just scientific but psychological knowledge that holds great power in society and is used to validate programs, processes, and policy regularly. Psychological knowledge has the potential to change or challenge attitudes, thinking and behaviours and carries the weight of sciences discourses of truth. Esteva (1993) describes hope in the margins, where consciousness does exist, but unless those living in and operating the dominant model develop that consciousness, it is a small, feeble, hope. Science, and as part of that institution of knowledge, psychology, is operated by a very discursively and materially dominant and powerful group who could take the lead in theory and practice by beginning with their own interrogation. A dominant standardised language can be used to obtain control (Illich, 1980) but it might also be used to advocate change and divest or share power. Community psychology has to speak to its own and seek collaboration in building the development of just systems. Can the scientific community be conceptualised as a system of existing resources within community? And what are the forces that might be seen to be causing this group (science/psychology) to actively resist or disintegrate?

Community psychology is one of many

bodies of work that have evolved under the broader rubric of psychology. The steady fragmentation of the discipline reflects a turn to parts that these authors argue reduces opportunities for holistic thinking, creates competition, reduces perceived and actual power of the field and reduces accountability and evaluation of the field as a whole. Decades of work in mental health have not seen improvement in overall conditions (Eisenberg, 1975, cited in Albee, 1980). Is this not a fundamental crisis within the field of mental health? Can its failures constitute a renewed desire to reconnect the community? Can part of a strategy of intervention involve the development of a framework with evaluative mechanisms that are sufficiently robust to act as a "container" for all mental health work? We do not mean by this the development of universalising theories or the validation of any one approach over another, but a framework under which the diversity of psychology's work can be accommodated. This work constitutes a framework that agrees upon and incorporates broad values, principles and processes of accountability.

Values, such as a commitment to interrogate whether the work of the field promotes social justice or injustice for either its community of interest or the broader population, need to be expressed in terms determined by those populations themselves. Thomas and Vends (1996) outline of values expresses commendable and appropriate desires, but they could be explicitly developed to incorporate goals and measures that hold them accountable. Berry (1993) highlights the lack of any integrating theory of the physical and the spiritual that underpins what is valued in western society. Levine and Perkins (1997) also draw attention to this area and identify it as overlooked. They highlight the way spiritual beliefs assist coping, connect individuals, develop a sense of community and reduce behaviours likely to lead to adverse events. Theory about the spiritual dimensions of experience is important (Sermabeikian, 1994, cited in Levine and Perkins, 1997) and yet as writers like Sermabeikian and Sorokin, (1941) point out, it is a difficult area for a discipline with a very material base and a sensory bias. How can community psychology not fully incorporate an important and identified phenomenon of human experience in its body of work? Is part of the crisis of the field its refusal

to look at unscientific phenomena?

An active relationship between theorists and communities is a necessary part of the process of change, something Newborough (1992) identifies as important for community psychology. This directs community psychology to generate strategies about communications and interventions that address the stakeholder communities of existing power, particularly of science. But it also calls for a look at the theoretical and conceptual framework of community psychology itself. A range of writers in the field identify that community psychology could improve theory to gain coherence, direction and focus (for example, see Rappaport, 1987).

Dohrenwends (1978) model of psychological stress is included in Levine and Perkins (1997, p. 87) book on community psychology in a chapter that identifies it as part of a conceptual roadmap of community psychology. The model is interesting because it has at center, the individual rather than the individual of and in community. The model is an excellent directive to consider the broader environment and person environment fit (Levine and Perkins, 1997), but it still brings us back to a focus on an individual rather than an individual of and in community. Newbrough (1992) notes this as a problem when he identifies the apparent difficulty in integrating the two concepts of community and psychology, or as he says, the one and the many. What is implied in Dohrenwends model is that event interpretation and experience is ultimately individual. The model does not consider that stressful events and psychopathological outcomes are also group or even community issues. Nor does it allow for the culturally mediated process of making meaning attached to events and how diversity of human subject positions might impact on that mediation. If it did it might direct us to consider the function and role of sources of (and positions of subjects/groups within) social power, values, knowledge and discourses on stressful experiences.

Dohrenwends (1974, cited in Levine and Perkins, 1997) framework could be modified to represent a broader theoretical base. In current form the moment of subject identification is of a subject pre-crisis but if primary prevention has a role to play we could include the subject pre-crisis and identify multiple intervention points. If the subject is included as subject in community then we can also be directed to recognise

psychopathologies that disproportionately affect whole groups or communities and therefore consider systematic levels of crisis intervention as well as individual therapies. It could also include an underpinning of evaluative strategies to proposed counteractions, in order to direct attention to whether specific interventions potentially perpetuate the status quo that creates negative stresses.

Values can and often do come with riders. Values of declared subjectivity, for example, can come with a declared commitment to interrogate our own cultural, moral and value commitments and the ways in which they might affect our critique or approach. Values of social justice can come with a commitment to evaluate whether the work we do promotes the perpetuation of systems of conditions in society that impact negatively on well being of any individuals or communities. Values can come with a commitment to active and accountable consideration of the societal repercussions of the fields theories and practices. Venio and Thomas (1996) suggest that like other disciplines in human services, community psychology can have explicit shared principles, values and roles that assist in informing and guiding practice. But should such a shared understanding be restricted to community psychology or be pursued more broadly? And can stated values be of any use if they do not come with structures and measures of accountability?

Science and psychology not only set their own measures but also critically set measures, in line with their values, to determine the health of societies or communities (Hunt, 1989). Western measures are underpinned by western values (Mason, 1984). An alternative is, as Hunt and Mander (1991) argue, to look to the vitality of a community as a measuring stick for progress. If we do, the paucity of terms in western models to assess community functioning at spiritual, emotional and sustainable levels, becomes quickly apparent. The alternative is to listen to individual communities, and let them, not strangers, set their terms of measure. For us as westerners, it is useful to reassess the value of the measures of our well-being also, when as Mander (1991) outlines, alternative indicators, based on values other than economic ones, reveal desperately unhealthy communities.

Categorisation and arrangement of the data of experience artificially creates norms and from

norms, produces (inevitably) the other, i.e., non-norm. Use of measures that forcibly brings the other back into account can challenge normative thinking. One example is Njoki Njoroge Njehus (2001) suggestion that the Dow Jones index be replaced with an account of the number of children that have preventably died in a week. As Barclay (1990) says (in the context of documenting ways of communities) when we make any representations let them speak about the process of their making and let the process be true to the community within which the maker is guest. Awareness is required that the language of science and of research and measures contains in its core, very subjective and culturally specific values and ideologies that we do not easily recognise as present and that might not be welcome guests in many communities.

We do not simply compartmentalise (and therefore omit parts of) human experience, we compartmentalise the right to participate in experiences (Albee, 1980). We categorise and break into parts human skills, and determine who will develop and use different skills. In western terms this process of specialisation has evolved into the long abdication of responsibility for meeting our own needs and the needs of others (Vela-McConnell, 1999). Specialisation also very effectively keeps us focused on parts and removes us further from knowledge of the whole. It can also blind us to the learning to be gained from experience and the roles so called non professionals can have in assisting positive mental health (Levine and Perkins, 1997), or the roles we might personally play in positively or negatively affecting the mental health of ourselves or others. Much western activism seeks the right for individuals to have personal authority over their lives and it is an authority that needs to be understood and reclaimed at a far deeper/larger level than might initially seem the case. The call for a right to earn a fair wage, to safe community housing or to decent child-care in a workplace are pieces of the whole.

What seems to be activism for change can be a call for a right to participate in the systems that cause inequity, not to reform them. Authority over our own lives means participating in, making decisions about, and just maybe, making changes to the way the whole system operates.

It would be foolish to imagine the world can be changed in one move and while tackling pieces of the puzzle is important, we have to keep an

eye on the bigger picture as we do so. Community psychology offers concrete experiences of viable alternatives to simply being allowed to participate in existing systems. As Jason (1991) says, documenting real world action models that have positively contributed to resolving social problems is important in gaining support for the work. Community psychology highlights time and time again the need for individuals to have a sense of social support and community, for alternative systems of community and stronger support structures within communities (Levine and Perkins, 1997). It also offers concrete accounts of the benefits that accrue when these are in place. For example Levine and Perkins describe demonstrably workable models that show the efficacy of community development, of replacing hierarchical models with horizontal structures, of devolving power, and of empowering individuals to develop their own community supports. Such work clearly shows the value in broadening both niche and experience to improve person environment fit that can occur when such approaches are taken.

Psychological research, including research in and of community psychology, is used in societies to inform the operations of public services, organisations, education, and political decisions (Levine and Perkins, 1997; Jason, 1991). Lobbying for effective positive change of these operations and active participation in creating that change requires personal and professional commitment (Jason, 1991). Evaluation of what the work of community psychology is used for and whether such use serves to increase or decrease social justice and the sustainability of communities is essential.

While we may feel and believe that we hold certain values dear, we would argue that we (whether it is we community psychologists or we individuals) do not interrogate the systems and structures of our lives. We do not study the words we use each day. We do not examine the actions we undertake, to explore their implicit values. We do not ask what all that might mean. If we do examine critically the values underpinning our western words and lifestyles, and become aware of their holistic implications, perhaps we will begin to generate sufficient awareness so that we feel a need to seek alternatives. The first step must be to awaken ourselves to a consciousness that we operate

our lives according to values that are largely hidden, to understand ourselves as culturally constructed beings who can choose to accept or reject those constructions. The common meeting ground for the many, has become the western capitalist marketplace (Berry, 1988) so creating communities and community systems of communication beyond that is essential. We also need to become conscious of holistic ways to assess the way we live, and through which to establish criteria for what is considered safe and positive for communities. To do this we require, as Mander (1991) says, competent tools to critically assess the holistic effects of technology, economics and policy among others, on cultures. Such tools will measure according to community determined criteria of what is or is not effective and positive for all the communities of which we are part. Construction of such tools is part of the project of intervention.

If we rest power in the hands of communities, create local control of productive assets, allow the slower pace such a step requires, then we might look to models like the one Mander (1991) describes, models that accept and promote what works for all. The idea of a greater good dissolves under this requirement. As Esteva (1993) says, let us take on and not devolve ourselves of concrete responsibilities.

But while acting locally we must think and act globally too, holding a keen awareness of our dependence on and obligations to our global community and environment. Community psychology acts to contribute knowledge to and is part of the process of what (re)produces social systems. It has a potentially major role to play in being an intervention for positive social change. Discourses, knowledge, power and the systems that maintain them are critical considerations within a framework that addresses community change, as are their processes of reproduction.

What does this leave us with? We end with a call for community psychology to evaluate the ways in which its own work alters or maintains socially inequitable systems and discourses. To understand that, community psychology, if it is not part of maintaining the status quo, is a key intervention strategy. Community psychology can participate in the multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder development of strategies that generate awareness of critical social issues in a way that contributes to a sense of community at

both local and global levels and facilitates action based responses to inequitable social conditions. Community psychology needs to include in its projects, discursive analysis, values theory and communications theory. Work could be undertaken across the discipline of psychology to reconnect the field and moves could be made to attempt to bring to the discipline a holistic framework. Most of all community psychology can hold itself accountable for explicitly and politically, living the values and goals that created the field.

It is worth ending a call for awareness with a warning that Panikkar (1993) gives, when seeking awareness and change, we need be careful we do not contribute to prolonging the agony of life in an unjust system by not being radical enough. Are we, are you, being radical enough?

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