

ON THE SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY:
SOME THOUGHTS AND A PERSONAL STORY

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I believe there is value in thinking about how to create emotional and intellectual resources to anchor, enhance and evolve our spirit when doing the work of community psychology.

By spirit I mean our passion, our zeal, our emotional energy to engage with our field. As my mother might say our “pluck”. I translated her comment as advocating dogged resolution.

When beginning our careers our families, social networks, mentors and senior colleagues are sources of strength, support and feedback that are fundamental for us to keep our spirits. When we begin our newly created professional roles, to make our way, it is largely up to us to create our own support systems to sustain our spirit. Our family and social networks, colleagues and students may be at our side. But it is ourselves who are challenged to personally cope.

I have been influenced by the work and writings of the Civil rights organizer Ella Baker. She believed that:

”My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or others...people have to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves”. (Payne, C. 1989).

Her assertion has given me resolve to create resources for my self. Later I will mention five other persons, from different disciplines, who have helped my resolve and enhanced my own spirit.

It has been the creation of personal, organizational and community resources in varied settings that has enabled me to create a career.

Recently I have had the opportunity with co-editor Anna V. Song to publish the narratives of eleven community psychologists. Their stories are inspiring. You

may know them personally: Julian Rappaport, Ed Trickett, Dick Reppucci, Beth Shinn, Jean Ann Linney and Rhona Weinstein in university settings and Irma Serrano Garcia, Carolyn Swift, Ann Mulvey, John Morgan and Tom Wolff from more applied settings. Reading them maybe inspirational to you as well. I mention them because I believe learning about those who enhanced the spirit of others can help us with our own identification with community psychology. There is a valid role for narrative in our field.

To the extent that being a community psychologist is being out of the mainstream, even marginal, within the larger profession of psychology there maybe fewer opportunities to receive validation and the respect we appreciate from colleagues. Creating personal resources for myself has been pivotal to my own efforts to maintain and enlarge my spirit.

In my comments today I will mention four topics that I think have merit not only to contribute knowledge but can benefit our collective spirit. I will then mention five persons from various disciplines who have contributed to my own spirit.

FOUR TOPICS and IDEAS FOR A RENEWED SPIRIT

In thinking about ways to increase personal resources not just for us as individuals but also for our collective work I offer four topics:

1. Increase understanding of systems
2. Increase interdisciplinary education
3. Increase ties to the work of community organizers.
4. Increase an emphasis on culture as explanatory concepts.

Implementing each of these suggestions can make us less dependent on the profession of psychology as our ONLY source of intellectual exchange. These additional resources may keep us involved with those soul mates in other disciplines that are engaged in direct, local efforts to enhance knowledge of complex social and community systems. These resources are potential antidotes against a too precious elitism and isolation when doing community psychology.

There is another feature. By investing in four topics like these I believe we increase the interdependencies between our research and our actions. The dichotomy between research vs. action is de-emphasized, put aside and evaporated!

By putting ourselves in settings to engage with other disciplines concerned with communities as systems we may expand our know how to better understand the latent resources and constraints affecting our concepts about individuals.

By knowing and working with persons from other disciplines we are stretching our concepts and methods.

By knowing and working with advocates of organizing communities for justice and equity we are keeping our selves alert to the systemic constraints limiting dignity and economic and social opportunities. Equally importantly we can learn more about how indigenous processes can bring about positive changes in communities.

By emphasizing a commitment to culture as a source of explanation and action we are creating the possibility that our work breaks out of the constraints of ethnocentrism.

Here are a few thoughts for these four topics:

SYSTEMS:

The special issue of the AJCP on System Change Edited by Pennie Foster-Fishman and Teresa Behrens (2007) is a stimulating example of the value of the contributions of concepts, methods and experiences of various disciplines, including psychology, in understanding and producing system change, a core interest of many community psychologists. One of the topics I learned about in this issue are the potentially fruitful concepts and methods outside my awareness that are very germane to understanding systemic change. Some examples are large group discussion techniques, the concepts of social capital, stocks and flows and system level tracking logs. Reading this special issue was like being presented with a gift of an encyclopedia from other disciplines

INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION:

Another Special Issue of AJCP on community based interdisciplinary research and education edited by Ken Maton, Doug Perkins and five others (2006) gives examples of how the conversations and collaborations with scholars from other disciplines can enhance the work of community psychology and enhance our spirit as we connect with others who share our goals. There were cogent ideas, cautions and resources to prepare the reader with a roadmap to engage in interdisciplinary work. Five case examples focus upon such topics as research with older minority adults, a HIV prevention project with married men in urban poor communities in Mumbai India, a food collective with eight disciplines promoting healthy foods in a working class African American community and a

process for bringing together design and social science students to learn about working in communities. A very welcome resource.

Both of these Special issues of AJCP provide encouragement and support to create a bridge with other disciplines. I was encouraged to see these resources now available. Doing these kinds of interdisciplinary work is no walk in the park. But these examples give us a chance to be stretched in our points of view. On balance I bet our spirit can be uplifted.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:

Si Kahn, the activist and songwriter said something about 25 years that has stuck with me. I pass it on:

“Through organizing, people begin to rediscover themselves. They find out whom they are, where they came from, their background, their history, their roots, and their culture. They rediscover the things in their family; their gender, their ethnic or language group, and their race that give them strength. They rediscover their own history of struggle and resistance” (Kahn, 1982).

There is a fruitful basis for collaboration between those who do community organizing and those of us who do community psychology. To the extent we are working with similar values we do need to understand our common paths.

It will take some effort on our side to understand the skepticism community organizers may have about us. I can say from personal experience that before working with a community organizing organization in Chicago I met community organizers from around the city. I learned that we can be perceived as elite, that we do our work and then we often leave the community high and dry and with their own great challenges untouched. We become a pollutant to the development of communities. That is tough to hear. When we can work out these cultural differences the shared work can be an inspiring experience and aid our spirit immensely. This was so in my case.

There are commonly shared beliefs between these two complimentary groups, the community organizer and the community psychologist. I was excited to see in the local paper that a graduate of Davis high school, Chris Morrill, whom I do not know, after graduating from Santa Clara University served two years in the Peace Corps in El Salvador. He said:

“When people know us and trust us, only then are we able to be effective in our work. For that reason, much of the first few months are spent getting to know the community and trying to become comfortable in this setting” Morrill, 2008).

He nailed it! He is in Bolivia for a third year. I hope that the community psychology professions can establish connections with the Peace Corps so that

young people like Chris Morrill can be recruited. Chris we need you and others like you!

Perhaps the major community psychology organizations also can facilitate the creation and use of web and other resources to help sharpen our insights and maybe even increase the rate of exchanges about both the content and processes of community research and action and community organizing world wide.

Culture

There is another resource that is essential to expand our knowledge of doing community based research and implementing community change: The concept of culture. From my experience there is insufficient experience and insights within psychology to understand real world experiences associated with social norms, class, gender, ethnicity as four examples. In the US we have been limited to understand the constraints and resources of different cultures. Related is the absence of knowledge about the subtleties of the American experience. When there is limited success with a preventive intervention often we do not dig into cultural explanations.

Recently reported research by Ka-yee-Leung, Maddox, Galinsky & Chiu provides empirical support that “exposure to multiple cultures in and of itself can enhance creativity” (2008.p169). This anchors the value that it is not just rhetoric about the benefits in digging into other cultures. Perhaps these benefits may extend to multi-disciplinary collaborations as well.

Mendoza-Denton and Mischel have provided an example of how the system concept AND the topic of culture can be integrated so that a system view of the culture AND a system view of the person are explicitly acknowledged to influence each other. As I read it this effort is a major step to generate inquiry and to provide a framework for an interdisciplinary understanding of the ecology of the person. (Mendoza-Denton & Mischel, 2007).

The same way of thinking can be extended to analyses of narratives (Miller, Fung & Koven 2007). In my work in Chicago I was impressed how the expression of narratives helped to build cohesiveness among citizens as well as generate a collective meaning to bring about change in their community. (Kelly, 2001).

The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz has inspired me. Three brief quotations tell the story of his impact:

“Not only does the object of study change, but the observer changes as well”.

“ Depiction is power. The representation of others is not easily separable from the manipulation of them”.

“ (The contribution) of anthropology is to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power, and yet contained in a world where tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way.”

WOW!

FIVE PERSONS WHO HAVE HELPED ME TO MAINTAIN MY SPIRIT IN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

For me, there have been many sources of inspiration, maybe very similar to yours. There are family, friends, mentors, music, theatre, reading biographies, autobiographies, as well as creating settings to celebrate persons and events and accomplishments. These are powerful and essential. My investment and immersion in community research has expanded my wisdom and know how which has made me a more enlightened person. I am very grateful to the many community leaders and foundation staff and colleagues from other disciplines that have enriched my knowledge and my soul.

I will celebrate five more persons whose ideas and presence have helped my spirit. While they are not the only sources that were influential at critical periods of my work

These five people through their words and deeds helped me to continue on my search for what I believed was my emerging career. They inspired me to keep at it. They still do.

Personal resources and constraints within your own communities maybe quite different from mine. So, I am very pleased that there will be contemporary voices contributing to this discussion.

First, something of the context of my graduate education. When I was at the University of Texas in the mid 1950’s, most faculty, both explicitly and implicitly, communicated that the good and true psychologist did experiments and basic research and did not do applied investigations or work directly with citizens as equal participants. There were some notable exceptions like Ira Iscoe, Lou Moran and Wayne Holtzman who told me that a psychologist did not need to

restrict oneself to be only the detached observer. I COULD be accepted among psychologists when I worked directly with citizens as co investigators.

As I thought of myself as a different psychologist I did not begin this developmental process with much clarity or self-confidence. I had a silent angst that I would be perceived as incorrect, second-class, deviant or an embarrassment to my self or my former teachers.

This process of identifying personal resources became a life long expedition.

These five persons' writings and presence made a substantial impact on my spirit. They are a psychiatrist, anthropologist, psychologist, philosopher, and a poet.

I have had the very good fortune to meet and know some of these persons. Others I know only from their writings.

ERICH LINDEMANN, PSYCHIATRIST (1900-1974)

In 1958 I began a post- doctoral fellowship with Erich Lindemann of Harvard Medical School. Ten years before he had created a multidisciplinary mental health clinic in the town of Wellesley Massachusetts which became a pioneering preventive service, fourteen years before the national community mental health movement. Both the model and Erich's own informal style and personality of being creative without being pompous and being a great listener and supportive person encouraged me to believe that I could develop a career as a psychologist working in the community.

The presence of active people from different professions in Wellesley and Boston excited me about the prospects of working collaboratively with citizens. I was fortunate to have this watershed experience immediately after receiving the PhD.

Those two years were essential years for I discovered a new paradigm in public health with its preventive and community based traditions. My spirit was soaring. I found an intellectual home that was far beyond the niches of psychology at the time. It is not only Erich alone but also the settings he created in Wellesley and the Medical School that congealed my identity.

I was at the right place at the right time and had the rare privilege of being mentored by a creative and supportive person who encouraged me to create my own ideas.

30 years later in talking with his widow I learned of the political and personal costs he suffered within his medical and psychiatric community because of his steadfast values to work collaboratively with social scientists and citizens. At the time to do this was heresy. This knowledge endeared him even more.

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ED WELLIN, ANTHROPOLOGIST (1917-)

In the spring of 1960, during the second post-doctoral year at the Harvard School of Public Health I enrolled in a course taught by the anthropologist Ben Paul (1911-2005). We read "Water Boiling in a Peruvian Town" a report of a two-year research project by the anthropologist Ed Wellin published in 1955. Wellin presented a beautiful example of how it was necessary for Wellin and a rural hygiene worker to immerse themselves into the village to understand the complexities of the social fabric of this small community of 200 households. He wanted to understand why certain persons took the health-engendering step to boil water to lower the incidence of typhoid fever while others did not. Wellin was an active listener and intrepid participant in the cultures of the smaller sub communities within this already small community.

One of his findings was that in this Peruvian town children were the most frequent water carriers from the nearest stream. Males and females of courtship age and married men did not carry water according to local norms and traditions. Wellin also learned that the acceptable times to boil water was after breakfast and after the noon meal; another ecological constraint.

I learned that, there was a complexity within small communities that could not be understood if one was pre-occupied with being an objective, detached, uninvolved scientist. Understanding class and heritage was learned AFTER respect from the various sub communities was obtained.

The improvised methods employed by Wellin were inspiring. He revealed the nascent quality of the town. My spirit was up lifted when I read about the insights of Wellin's immersion and the processes of his building trust.

One of his major findings was that when stimulating an innovation in a community it is essential to create cordial and trusting personal relationships between the researcher and the community. This was essential! Today, this is a truism but back then it was a very provocative and even radical insight.

The significance of Wellin's work was that although the efforts to have citizens boil water had limited success it was the elegant analysis of the villagers and their various contexts that helped explain the determinants of their behavior. Wellin grappled directly to understand the everyday issues of people.

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The Promotion of Wellness in children and adolescents. Washington D.C.CWLA Press, 101-131.

ROGER BARKER, PSYCHOLOGIST (1903-1990)

Barker spent his entire career (1947-1972) documenting the social settings of a small Kansas town, Oskaloosa by name. What he did was document the places where the residents spent their lives. He discovered that places taken for granted and not thought about much were in fact the primary ways in which the town was a viable social system. Settings like "Household Auction Sale" and "High School Boys Basketball Game", "Restaurants & Diners", "Drugstores" & "Garages" defined the town. He and his colleagues' convictions and ingenuity to create methods to document these settings plus his unyielding courage to document places, not individuals, alone, had an inspiring impact.

One of his later achievements was to conduct a comparative study of the public settings of Oskaloosa and a comparative town in North Yorkshire England ten years apart. One of the stimulating findings was that over the ten-year period Oskaloosa was expanding the number of settings for adolescents; Oskaloosa was more involved in generating activities for adolescents. In Yordale, in contrast, settings were found to be often on the streets and sidewalks. This type of analysis encouraged me to think about the qualities of settings and their influence on community life.

Barker was not one to publish discrete studies but waited until he had a grasp of the complexities of the town of then some 1,000 people. He lived in the town. No doubt he and his wife's presence as residents helped his research to be accepted and added to the clarity of his interpretations of the richness of the settings.

Barker's work was a compelling example of actually studying places and raising the then novel idea that not only qualities of individuals but qualities of places gave insights and knowledge not thought about before.

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Barker, R.G. & Schoggen, P. (1973). *Qualities of community life: Methods of measuring environment and behavior applied to an American and an English town*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Schoggen, P. (1989). *Behavior Settings*. Stanford California Stanford University Press.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN (1889-1951)

The writings of Wittgenstein were like finding a soul mate. He had written a book in the trenches of World War I that was quickly revered by the newly forming logical positivists. Logical Positivists had much influence on psychology especially during the 1920's through 1950's. Their premise was that if a concept could not be empirically verified it did not exist.

As soon as Wittgenstein was going to be greeted as an intellectual leader for the group he rejected their tribute and refuted his earlier work. He then went on a constant journey throughout his life to develop another perspective that questioned his own prior work. The content of his ideas and his intellectual toughness, courage and conscience impressed me.

I also liked his way of living. He did not accept his part of the family fortune and was not enamored by professional philosophy. I liked the creative independence

of his ideas and his spirit. A remark that he made when referring to someone who was notably generous or kind or honest was “He is a HUMAN being”.

I noted that he could whistle long passages of music from memory. I aspired to do that. He designed a house for his sister down to the doorknobs. I could not do that.

He believed that the meaning of concepts was due to the forms of life in which they were embedded. An ecological premise. He also believed that a result of philosophical thinking was: NOT a truth discovered but a confusion dissolved.

He was a fresh voice that encouraged my hope to create my own work and not be trapped by tradition or custom or the dominant paradigm. He fueled my hopes to continue on my own journey to break new ground. He became a favorite invisible uncle.

On my home page I have a Wittgenstein quote:

“We feel that even when all POSSIBLE scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched”.

Malcolm, N. (1958). Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir. New York: Oxford University Press.

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New York: The Free Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1922). Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus
London: Rutledge.

William Stafford (1914-1993)

When I was at the University of Oregon in the mid 1970's I went to a meeting of professors advocating more community involvement. The poet William Stafford was there. He did not speak except a few words at the very end when he wondered out loud if it was not also important to stay at home and be with family and kin. I was surprised. He then read a poem. After the meeting I told him that it

was a wonderful poem. Could I have a copy? He handed me the hand written lines as a gift. I was stunned. It was then that I began to learn about this Poet Laureate of Oregon who was on the faculty of Lewis and Clark College in Portland.

He was a conscientious objector during World War II. He wrote over fifteen books in his poetry career. He said “ I think you create a good poem by revising your life.”

I will read the first four lines of one of his poems: “A Ritual To Read To Each Other”. It was included in his first published book of poems “West of Your City” in 1960 when he was 46 years old.

“If you don’t know the kind of person I am
and I don’t know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god
home we may miss our star”.

Those four lines anchored my search for a collaborative research style especially for the ten years of work with African American community leaders in Chicago in the 1990’s. That poem affirmed my inchoate conviction to listen, learn and try to understand the concerns and hopes of these leaders .I was sustained by the commitment of the community leaders and retained in my memory Stafford’s poem.

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CONCLUSION:

These four topics: systems, interdisciplinary education, community organizing and culture are offered as fruitful topics that can connect our intellectual interests with our values. Any fragmented nature that is latent within our field can be reduced. In doing so our spirit is congealed and uplifted. We have renewed pluck.

In mentioning the five persons I hope that I have expressed how personal resources can help ones intellectual spirit and serve as a catalyst to engage our work, our expeditions.

These five persons were mighty sources for my spirit.

Through their work, their persistence, their courage and their willingness to go beyond tradition inspired my own efforts to set out in my own direction. They each were persons who made a big difference in how I thought and how I proceeded and how I then made my way.

They are specific of course to my being born and coming of age when I did. They helped me in my varied settings and in my travails to keep exploring my ideas and testing them when there was often small support for them until later in my career.

Without these people and others like them it is uncertain if I could have continued my work with élan and if my spirit could have been buoyant enough to carry through what has become a most satisfying series of expeditions in community psychology.

I very much look forward to hear from others on your efforts to contain and enhance your own spirit for community psychology.

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