

Community Psychologies: What are they? What could they be? Why does it matter? A Critical Community Psychology Approach

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What is community psychology? Whilst some might assume this, superficially straightforward, question could be adequately answered by citing a definition given by an influential community psychologist, a popular text book author, quoting from a website such as that of the Society for Community Research and Action (<http://www.scra27.org/>) or an editorial statement in a journal like this, we regard community psychology as part of the critical project within which authority is problematised and contested so, rather than giving an answer to the question “What is community psychology?”, we problematise the question itself and use the process of problematising to construct understanding of manifestations of community psychology which are part of the problem or part of the solution as far as understanding and contesting popular oppression are concerned.

Rather than seeking immediate answers to the question “What is community psychology?” we are ultimately interested in answers to the critical questions: Who has the authority to construct ‘community psychology’? How can such authority be resisted? Through which social processes is that authority achieved i.e., by virtue of what and whom is that authority constructed and legitimated? Whose interests are served by the various constructions of community psychology achieved through the deployment of, or resistance to, that authority?

There are many, very different, sets of concepts, techniques and practices which have been positioned through the deployment of different discourses as ‘community psychology’ by different interest groups at different times in different places. Just to confine ourselves for now to textbooks of community psychology written by academics,

we have read such textbooks claiming to explicate community psychology by academics from: the United Kingdom (e.g., Orford, 1992, 2008); South Africa (e.g., Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001); New Zealand and Australia (e.g., Thomas & Veno, 1992, 1996) and the United States of America (e.g., Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Rappaport, 1977).

What is constructed as community psychology in one textbook is sometimes rather different from, and sometimes rather similar to, that presented in another textbook. Even within one country, what is presented as community psychology at one time in that country’s textbooks is often very different from that presented at another time in other textbooks. For example, compare community psychology as explicated in Rappaport (1977) and Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005). The same textbook author may present different versions of community psychology at different times such as when textbooks are revised (for example, see the two versions of the text book by Orford, 1992, 2008). On the other hand, different textbook authors writing at the same time in different countries sometimes present very different versions of community psychology. For example, compare Seedat, Duncan and Lazarus (2001) with Dalton et al. (2001). Sometimes textbook authors writing at different times in different countries explicate surprisingly similar versions of community psychology. For example, compare Rappaport (1977), and Orford (1992). To make it even more complicated, sometimes there are obvious similarities between different accounts in different places and what are superficially different accounts are revealed on closer examination to be surprisingly similar at a deeper level, for example, Dalton et al. (2001)

and Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005).

Since there are a variety of community psychologies constructed differently in different textbooks published by various authors at different times in different places, it is clear that there are diverse community psychologies and clear that different community psychologies, like other social phenomena, are products of the time, place and conditions of their construction. This raises the question as to which, if any, should be taken seriously by whom, why and for what purposes?

However, definitions of community psychology are merely one conventional way in academia in which various community psychologies are explicitly constructed, maintained and legitimated in formal texts. There are also myriad less obvious, implicit, ways in which community psychologies are constructed. These are sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit. However, being explicit or implicit is not, from a critical perspective, just a matter of specificity of prose but also relates to whether the accounts are positioned within dominant or subjugated discourses. Bringing these to critical awareness, or surfacing them is, in part, a function of the extent to which readers' subjectivities are saturated by, or manifestations of internalised, dominant discourses and the extent to which collective critical literacy has been facilitated by radical reflexivity, popular education, conscientisation, etc. Reading a textbook of community psychology is, in other words, an active process involving critical processing of discourse and the 'surfacing' of community psychologies constructed within and through those discourses.

Although, we have concerned ourselves so far only with textbooks, the latter are not the only nor the prime means through which community psychologies are constructed and legitimated: different community psychologies are also produced in and through presentations, journal articles, lecture courses, DVDs, conversations, IT forums, email, papers like

this and also techniques, practices and procedures.

Because it gets so long-winded to keep listing textbooks, journal articles, lecture series, techniques, practices and procedures, etc., in this paper we refer to them all as 'texts'. In everyday language 'text' is usually used to refer only to what is written but within Foucauldian approaches 'text' is used more widely to refer to any interconnected tissue of symbols.

By referring to community psychologies being 'produced in' diverse texts, we are distancing ourselves from any suggestion that the relation between community psychologies and texts is anything other than an active one of enactment and emphasising that community psychologies are actively constructed out of socially given materials including discursive resources.

There are, then, many different community psychologies. However they are not all as prominent. Some are more dominant than others: some are repeated more frequently, with more force, in contexts positioned as more authoritative within dominant discourses etc. than others. The dominance of these community psychologies has little to do with 'truth' or 'reality' or effectiveness, in the orthodox sense of these terms, but everything to do with the cultural and political power to dictate of those who promote them.

The question with which we started out, "What is community psychology?", has now turned through the process of problematising into a far more complicated and interesting set of questions. What socially constructed and maintained community psychologies, whether explicitly defined or implicit in diverse texts, practices and procedures, can be surfaced? Which accounts are dominant as opposed to subjugated? How has this dominance been achieved and maintained? How are accounts given the status of knowledge of what is the case, or as we prefer to put it, how are they 'truthed'? What are the power implications of this knowledge? Which local and wider social, political, economic and other interests are

served by these various community psychologies¹?

Let us now ask some of these questions of one of the currently dominant community psychologies: United Statesian (we use this term to avoid using the term 'American' as the community psychologies constructed by – at least some – Central and South Americans are radically different from how those constructed by many United Statesians).

The dominant US community psychology, which has been socially constructed and maintained, explicitly or implicitly, in many 'texts', and which is legitimated by many narratives, such as the claim that community psychology emerged in the USA in the 1960s out of US domestic political events (Fryer, 2008a), serves the interests of US community psychology and thus also the interests of those who benefit from that. It is important to be clear that, from our critical community psychology perspective, when it is asked whose interests are served by US community psychology, this is not meant in just the narrow sense of which US individuals (authors) or sub-groups of US psychologists benefit personally. The interests served go way beyond those of United Statesian community psychologists to those of powerful groups who benefit from things staying the same oppressive way they are due to the generally acritical and ideologically reactionary nature of US community psychology.

United Statesian community psychology is very powerful in many ways and text book versions of what community psychology is, which are ideologically anchored in the individualistic 'culture' of the USA have been powerfully exported and have found their ways into many other community psychologies through processes which constitute, essentially, intellectual and cultural colonialism.

The USA globally dominates community psychology textbook and journal production. The USA has a relatively large and effective professional organisation in the Society for

Community Research and Action which promotes the interests of US community psychologists. The USA has more postgraduate community psychology training courses than any other nation, more money to fund studentships and thus more potential to attract overseas students, train them in US community psychology then export them, together with the US version of community psychology back to their countries of origin as community psychology 'cuckoos'. The USA has more community psychology academic staff than any other nation and these US staff have, collectively, greater access to more resources to enable them to travel the world professing US community psychology than staff from anywhere else. US community psychology has the resources to e-dominate community psychology globally via discussion lists (with their disciplinary function) electronic 'platforms', and the use of IT (e.g., an attempt by community psychologists in the USA to use 'You Tube' as a means to promote community psychology amongst young people).

Put bluntly, the USA has the resources and personnel to promote its community psychology in exactly the same way that it promotes its soft drinks industry, fast food industry and film industry. The ideological domination of community psychology by United Statesian versions of community psychology is arguably just another manifestation of United Statesian global military, economic, cultural and intellectual domination.

There is a risk of USA community psychology obliterating diverse thriving models for community psychology in other parts of the world, for example, in South Africa, South and Central America, supplanting fledgling de-colonising approaches of community psychology found in the practices of indigenous peoples, for example, in New Zealand and Australia and also, we believe, in Europe.

As an example of US community psychological colonisation, consider the "2nd International Conference on Community

Psychology: Building Participative, Empowering and Diverse Communities – Visioning Community Psychology in a worldwide perspective" which was held in Lisbon, Portugal from 4-6 June 2008, following on from the first in this series in Puerto Rico. Whilst there have been a number of conferences with international attendance organised in Australia/New Zealand (the Trans-Tasman biennials), in the USA (SCRA Biennials) and in Europe (Biennial Conferences of the European Network of Community Psychology – now superseded by the European Community Psychology Association), the 2nd International Conference on Community Psychology in Lisbon could claim to be more international than most. After all, its Organising Committee was composed of members from Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, Portugal, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Spain, UK and the USA, and its Scientific Committee was composed of members from Australia (Chair), Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Spain, USA and Venezuela. Turning to content, the programme of the 2nd International Conference on Community Psychology in Lisbon included over 350 verbal presentations and over 130 poster presentations whose abstracts referred to contributors from at least 30 countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Columbia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Mozambique, New Zealand, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, UK, USA and Venezuela.

However, having people from a variety of countries serving on high status conference committees or traveling to a conference to read papers does not necessarily mean that a conference is international in any sense important to community psychology, any more than Hollywood film stars jetting around the world to attend film premieres and gala screenings means that the USA film industry is

international.

It is noteworthy that the 2nd International Conference on Community Psychology sub-title ("Visioning Community Psychology in a worldwide perspective") closely echoed recent preoccupations of the United Statesian Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) with 'visioning' in general (Wolff, 2006); "The Vision" currently dominating the SCRA website in particular and other SCRA activities³.

It is also noteworthy that six of the seven pre-conference 'Institutes' before the Lisbon conference were run by United Statesians; that the only Keynote Address at Lisbon was given by a United Statesian; that three out of the eight 'Thematic Keynotes' were given by United Statesians; and that one in five of all presentations at Lisbon were given by United Statesians, although the USA was only one in thirty of the countries represented at the conference.

However, for us, the major problem with USA domination of community psychology is not limited to its tendency to obliterate diversity with a mono-cultural vision but that, from our critical standpoint, much of the community psychology exported/promoted by the USA is ideologically problematic. Despite adoption of a progressive rhetoric, much US community psychology is individualistic, naively ethnocentric, increasingly formulaic, acritical and hardly distinguishable from the mainstream discipline, especially in practice. Much of US community psychology is, in other words, effectively acritical mainstream psychology business as usual.

It would be easy to illustrate this by reference to one of the many parochial, acritical, US text books of community psychology. However, instead we focus on one of the strongest and, rhetorically at least, most critical textbooks produced by community psychology editors who are widely regarded as being amongst the most critically oriented of community psychologists in North America. Isaac Prilleltensky and Geoff Nelson have been

responsible for a series of critical publications including *The Morals and Politics of Psychology: Psychological Discourse and the Status Quo* (1994), *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well-being* (2005) and *Doing Psychology Critically: Making a Difference in Diverse Settings* (2002).

Nelson and Prilleltensky's (2005) community psychology textbook, *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well Being*, whilst relatively strong on critical community psychology in theory, is critically weak, in our opinion, when it comes to critical community psychology in practice. Despite provisos about the difficulty of defining community psychology (p. 4) and although they admit (table 3.3 p. 61) that whilst support for community structures, social justice, holism and accountability have amongst the most potential for social change, they are currently amongst the least prominent in community psychology, Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) write that, "the central problem with which CP is concerned is that of oppression, and that the central goals of CP are to work in solidarity with disadvantaged people and to accompany them in their quest for liberation and well-being" (p. 24).

Given their commitment to contesting oppression, solidarity with disadvantaged people, promotion of liberation and well-being and support for community structures, social justice, holism and accountability, Nelson and Prilleltensky's (2005) text book evangelising a critical version of community psychology, might have been expected to showcase inspiring exemplars of critical community psychology in action. It is therefore all the more of an anti-climax to read the volume's treatment of disabling practices or, as Glen White puts it, 'Ableism', in Chapter 20 of Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005).

Although White's chapter starts with a warm-up exercise asking what community psychologists can do to reduce discrimination against 'people with disabilities' and although it suggests the 'challenges for community

psychologists' relate to 'power', 'diversity', 'partnership and collaboration', 'subjectivity and reflexivity' and although White claims the 'work is guided by values consistent with the aims of CP' including 'participation/ collaboration, diversity and social justice', the actual practice described falls well short of this. Here is an example of explicit and implicit community psychologies being quite different in the same work.

White gives 'two recent examples of our community-based work addressing the concerns of people with disabilities', previously stated to be exclusion, discrimination and access'. The first example White gives is 'The Action Letter Portfolio'. This 'self administered guide helps users write their own personal disability concern letters.' Not only is this an ameliorative, cognitive, individual level change intervention based on victim-blaming, skill-deficit, assumptions but it was not even effective in the sense that 'the skills that participants demonstrated under training conditions' did not even transfer to their own personal letter writing outside the training. The second example White gives is an intervention to increase physical activity levels in 'women with severe disabilities'. White notes:

The study goal was remarkable because it encouraged women to self-direct their increases in physical activity in their homes or selected community sites. This approach was a more realistic alternative than regularly working-out at a fitness centre because of the barriers posed for the participants (cost, need for accessible transportation and the lack of physical and programmatic accessibility). (p. 419)

This example is again critically deeply problematic in that it is an individual level, cognitive, ameliorative intervention which positions women's lack of enthusiasm for exercise (in assuming encouragement is an

appropriate intervention) as the problem to be addressed and accepts the physical and economic inaccessibility of public fitness facilities and transport as a given to which the women should accommodate.

White admits that his community psychology interventions have ‘most often’ been ‘ameliorative rather than transformative’ directed at achieving individual level ‘first-order’ change such as ‘increasing a desirable behaviour’ (e.g., physical activity) or ‘decreasing an undesirable behaviour (that is powerlessness)’. That White sees powerlessness as individual level behaviour is worrying in itself. White then draws upon his wider knowledge of the community psychology literature but can only come up with what he describes as “two strong examples of transformation, where second order change has truly occurred” (p. 419). One ‘resulted from consumer complaints about inappropriate wording and portrayals of people with disabilities . . . and led to the development of a nationally recognized resource for the media on how to write about and report on people with disabilities.’ The other ‘showed that handicapped (sic) parking signs clearly indicating the potential amount of fines that one could incur for parking illegally were more effective when compared to the standard handicapped (sic) parking signs’ (p. 420) and this led to some states changing their signs. These do not seem to us “strong examples of transformation” and it is a sign of the limitedness and ineffectiveness of 30 years of community psychology disability research if these are the most critically informed transformatory interventions which White is able to cite. It is not just that no real impact on discriminatory disabling practices and procedures has been achieved, the discriminatory status quo is of course well defended. It is more that there seems no serious engagement with the task. The commitment in theory of community psychology to tackle injustice and to promote the liberation and well being of disabled

people seems purely rhetorical.

In contrast with White’s acritical community based disability work, we next describe some Scottish ‘community critical psychological’ praxis which has attempted to resist, in theory and practice, ideological and intellectual colonisation by the United Statesian version of what community psychology is and to get to grips critically with disabling practices, procedures and policies. This work, achieved by a participatory collective including one of the co-authors, Adele Laing, was an engagement in sustained praxis over several years in relation to disabling practice, procedures and policies in several Higher Education Institutions in Scotland.

As we use it, ‘praxis⁴’ refers to an ongoing, irreducible, collective process through which is enacted, in one and the same process, ‘knowledgementing’ (the construction and legitimation of knowledge claims), ‘radical reflexivity’ (the bringing to awareness and critical problematisation of interests served by what is thought, said and done by all relevant parties), and ‘ideologically progressive social action’ (the pursuit of emancipatory process and just outcomes and the contesting of ‘external and internal⁵’ institutional oppression.

We locate praxis within a critical frame of reference which rejects naïve realism and positions reality as socially constructed but, none-the-less, as having ‘real’ effects. Crucially, in our frame of reference no distinction is drawn between power and knowledge: power-knowledge is irreducible and the components cannot be separated. As Foucault (1997) puts it: “power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relation” (p. 27). For more on our thinking about power see Fryer (2008b).

This praxis rejects accommodationist, North American style, Community Psychology and is informed by the work of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1977), Paulo Freire (1972), the British Disabled

Peoples' Movement (<http://www.bcodp.org.uk/>) and associated scholars, Paul Hunt (1966) and Michael Oliver (1992), and explicates the way disability is constructed and maintained in Scottish Higher Education Institutions through interconnectivity between (or as Foucault might have put it assemblages or apparatuses consisting of) interconnected practices, procedures, policies, discourses and other key frames of reference.

The praxis involved problematising interviews with various members of Scottish Higher Education Institutions or associated public organisations, through which unjust interpretations of 'disability' were co-knowledgemented, critically co-problematised and co-challenged, with their ideological nature co-exposed and alternative, more just, interpretations co-explored; paid and voluntary work with various personnel tasked with providing disability related services and support during which oppressive activities were surfaced, institutional interests served identified and reactionary means of action and interpretation problematised; participation in a Higher Education Institution's high level working group tasked with amending disability policy and procedures knowledgeenting oppressive ways institutional decisions are made to maintain/enhance existing disabling policies and procedures; supporting a disabled students' group to establish themselves and then to surface and contest the problematic way in which the institution had silenced their critical voice from a wide reaching institutional audit required by national legislation and in which their inputs had been distorted to represent the institution's interests; meeting law and policy makers from the national parliament to problematise existing policy and procedures and to champion alternative arrangements which were more likely to support just ends; and the creation and running of an on-line inter-institutional critical disability studies course offered to members of various Scottish Higher Education Institutions to enable those who enrolled not only to

individually earn a module credit fulfilling bona fide university degree module requirements but to allow them to collectively engage in: de-ideologisation and sustained critical conscientisation of dominant conceptions of what constitutes disability; theoretical discussion and shared co-construction of new accounts of disability; familiarisation with and critique of accessible accounts of the legislative duties to which institutions were accountable; scrutiny of organisational disabling practices and procedures. The aim of this dimension of the praxis was to provide course members with the resources to pursue and ensure their civil and human rights to education and contest discriminatory practices, procedures and policies.

The praxis collective demonstrated, sought to understand and challenge why, in spite of apparently progressive practices, policies and procedures, well intentioned people, and despite students battling hard to succeed, Scottish Higher Education Institutions are still disabling places, that is, still places where the likelihood of success or failure is distributed unevenly and unjustly across the population to the detriment of certain students who become disabled by the way the institutions operate. Why, despite all the amendments to legislation and proposals to amend existing policies, practices and procedures in order to make universities places which do not disable or operate in discriminatory ways, little has changed or where it has done, has changed for the worse in recent times.

The praxis collective constructed an account which exposed the wider economies at work producing disability in Higher Education, and how those economies function to prevent emancipatory change but instead to produce and maintain disability through various apparatuses of disciplinary power functioning together, interlocking components of a disabling machine which keeps oppressive practices, procedures and policies the same no matter what changes are attempted.

The praxis collective, as do we as community critical psychologists, strived to problematise ideologically reactionary aspects of mainstream ‘knowledge and practice’ (rather than collude with them), develop epistemologically sophisticated knowledgementing practices (rather than default to formulaic methodology), develop innovative socio-structural inter- and pre-ventions (rather than default to traditional intra-psychic blame or change), collaborate with collectives (rather than work unilaterally on or for individuals), promote social change (rather than psychological adaptation), engage in emancipatory process and outcome through progressive redistribution of power (rather than collude with or contribute to oppressive (re) distribution of power), make processes of psychological oppression visible and contest them (rather than camouflage, mystify and collude with them), provide new legitimated knowledge, demonstrate new ways of producing knowledge which are participatory and socially just, and offer new ways to people to engage with us in emancipatory social research. Note that here we are, effectively, making explicit a community critical psychology to which we are committed which is implicit in the praxis described.

We believe that community psychology is becoming increasingly endangered as a critical alternative to mainstream disciplinary ideology, theory, procedure and practice. We believe that community psychology is becoming increasingly colonised and dominated by acritical United Statesian versions of community psychology. However, we also believe this transformation is not inevitable and could be checked or reversed by community psychologists taking a critical turn in theory, ideology and practice and engaging in praxis, building upon work such as that we have described above.

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Notes

- ¹ We note in passing that the same reconstruction through problematising could be carried out with other questions such as: “What is clinical psychology?” or indeed “What is psychology?”.
- ² “The Society for Community Research and Action will have a strong, global impact on enhancing well-being and promoting social justice for all people ...” (SCRA Executive Committee, 2007).
- ³ For example the 12th Biennial Conference of the SCRA bears the title, “Realising Our New Vision”.
- ⁴ This notion of praxis is more fully explicated in Laing (2008).
- ⁵ The distinction between external and internal oppression is not clear cut because oppressive societal discourses and ideologically reactionary frames of reference are often internalised and experienced as ‘subjective reality’.

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