

# AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

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## What Is Community Psychology?

To read any introductory text in the field of psychology, one would guess that the typical psychologist spends all of his or her time dreaming up and conducting arcane laboratory experiments, often of questionable relevance to pressing real world concerns. On the contrary, however, most psychologists work in naturally occurring situations and settings. In addition to the clinical and testing psychologists, with whom the public is most familiar, many people--at all levels of professional training--are entering a relatively new field called community psychology. Community psychology is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between social systems and individual well-being in the community context. Thus, community psychologists grapple with an array of social and mental health problems and they do so through research and interventions in both public and private community settings.

One of the most exciting aspects of community psychology is that the field is developing rapidly and is still in the process of defining itself. It is not easily reduced to the traditional content categories in psychology for several reasons. First, community psychologists simultaneously emphasize both (applied) service delivery to the community and (theory-based) research on social environmental processes. Second, they focus, not just on individual psychological make-up, but on multiple levels of analysis, from individuals and groups to specific programs to organizations and, finally, to whole communities. Third, community psychology covers a broad range of settings and substantive areas. A community psychologist might find herself or himself conducting research in a mental health center on Monday, appearing as an expert witness in a courtroom on Tuesday, evaluating a hospital program on Wednesday, implementing a school-based program on Thursday, and organizing a community board meeting on Friday. For all the above reasons, there is a sense of vibrant urgency and uniqueness among community psychologists--as if they are as much a part of a social movement as of a professional or scientific discipline.

## What Isn't Community Psychology?

It may be useful to describe community psychology by distinguishing it from other disciplines with which it is closely allied. Community psychology is like clinical psychology and community mental health in its action orientation. That is, community psychology aims to promote human welfare. But community psychology arose largely out of dissatisfaction with the clinician's tendency to locate mental health problems within the individual. Community psychologists are more likely to see threats to mental health in the social environment, or in lack of fit between individuals and their environment. They typically advocate social rather than individual change. They focus on health rather than on illness, and on enhancing individual and community competencies.

Community psychology is like public health in adopting a preventive orientation. That is, community psychologists try to prevent problems before they start, rather than waiting for them to become serious and debilitating. But community psychology differs from public health in its concern with mental health, social institutions, and the quality of life in general. In many ways, community psychology is like social work, except that it has a strong research orientation. Community psychologists are committed to the notion that nothing is more practical than rigorous, well-conceived research directed at social problems.

Community psychology is like social psychology and sociology in taking a group or systems approach to human behavior, but it is more applied than these disciplines and more concerned with using psychological knowledge to resolve social problems. It borrows many techniques from industrial and organizational psychology, but tends to deal with community organizations, human service delivery systems, and support networks. Plus, it focuses simultaneously on the problems of clients and workers as opposed to solely the goals and values of management. It is concerned with issues of social regulation and control, and with enhancing the positive

characteristics and coping abilities of relatively powerless social groups such as minorities, children, and the elderly.

### What Community Psychologists Do

The new and disparate areas of community psychology are thus bound together by a singular vision: that of helping the relatively powerless, in and out of institutions, take control over their environment and their lives. This should, in turn, foster in all of us a greater "psychological sense of community." Community psychologists must, however, "Wear many hats" in working toward the creation of social systems which: (1) promote individual growth and prevent social and mental health problems before they start; (2) provide immediate and appropriate forms of intervention when and where they are most needed; and (3) enable those who have been labelled as "deviant" to live as dignified and self-controlled a life as possible, preferably as a contributing member of the community.

For example, a community psychologist might (1) create and evaluate an array of programs and policies which help people control the stressful aspects of community and organizational environments; (2) assess the needs of a community and teach its members how to recognize an incipient problem and deal with it before it becomes intractable; or (3) study and implement more humane and effective ways for formerly institutionalized populations to live productively in society's mainstream.

Community psychology is not only a professional and scientific discipline. It is also an intellectual/ value orientation that is applicable to virtually any field or profession. The community perspective challenges traditional modes of thought. It looks at whole ecological systems, including political, cultural, and environmental influences, as well as focusing on institutional and organizational factors. It realizes that the "interaction" between a person and the environment may have as important an effect on his or her behavior as the effect each factor has separately. The community approach also emphasizes the effects of stress and social support, and the practicality of prevention and self-help. Furthermore, it recognizes the demand for local empowerment and bureaucratic decentralization (and anti-professionalism) and the importance of cultural relativity and diversity. The community perspective simultaneously stresses the utility of research, not only for theory development, but for program evaluation and policy analysis--and the omni presence of values (implicitly or explicitly) throughout society and even science. An important aspect of the community orientation is its appreciation of the authority of historical and structural contexts. And, finally, it emphasizes community and personal strengths and competency, as opposed to weaknesses and pathology.

### Professional and Non-professional Opportunities in Community Psychology

Any brief introduction to a field as broad and varied as community psychology can give only a superficial flavor of all that it is, and can be, about. For those who want a more in-depth look at all that community psychology has to offer, I recommend an introductory course and/or the book list, below. Many, if not most, undergraduate institutions across the country now offer a course in community psychology, prevention, or "community" courses in social work or sociology.

The Society for Community Research & Action (SCRA; Division 27 of the American Psychological Association) is the official organization of community psychology (website: [Home - Society for Community Research and Action - SCRA](#) or <http://www.scr27.org>; see also the [New Community Psychology Network: CPN](#)). There are reduced-cost student memberships. SCRA sponsors excellent regional and national conferences on Community Research and Action. It publishes *The Community Psychologist* newsletter and *The American Journal of Community Psychology*. Other academic journals related to community psychology include *J. of Community Psychology*, *J. of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* (formerly *Prevention in Human Services*), *J. of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *Community, Work & Family*, *J. of Rural Community Psychology*, *Community Development J.*, *J. of the Community Development Society*, *Environment & Behavior*, *J. of Environmental Psychology*, *J. of Primary Prevention*, *Prevention Science*, *J. of Social Issues*, *J. of Applied*

The employment prospects for professional community psychologists remain favorable. Part of the reason may be that, as so many social and mental health problems worsen, service administrators are beginning to appreciate the value of people trained to investigate and solve problems at the organizational, as opposed to the individual, level. The demand for community psychologists may also be due to their versatile ability to address problems in virtually any public (and even private) sector setting. What sets community psychologists apart, in this regard, is the emphasis of their training on a set of generic, applied field research methodologies, rather than on a single, substantive content area of empirical "facts." A more mundane, yet still noteworthy, explanation of our relatively high employment rate is that it may reflect a large number of clinical, social, and organizational psychologists who identify themselves as "community-oriented" psychologists. Such affiliations have no doubt proved useful since community-related concerns became a "priority" area for programmatic and research development. This should not bother "full-fledged" community psychologists as long as the others are serious about their community interests and identity.

The reader should note that formal training is not a prerequisite to practicing community psychology. Earlier in this introduction, I mentioned the ways in which the "community perspective" can enlighten anyone's approach to solving psychologically-related problems at work and in their community. Furthermore, the reader is encouraged to participate in self-help groups, service programs, and community action committees. If these organizations do not exist in your neighborhood or area of concern, then organize one yourself. After all, necessity is the "mother"--not only of invention--but of community psychology as well.

**Graduate Programs in Community Psychology and related fields** (see [www.scra27.org/resources/education/academicpr](http://www.scra27.org/resources/education/academicpr)): For those who might be interested in graduate training in community psychology, there are many different types of academic programs from Master degrees in program evaluation and administration to doctoral programs in community research. Many of these also offer clinical training.

From the old SCRA homepage: [www.apa.org/divisions/div27/](http://www.apa.org/divisions/div27/):

Welcome! The Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), Division 27 of the American Psychological Association, serves many different disciplines that focus on community research and action. Our members have found that, regardless of the professional work they do, the knowledge and professional relationships they gain in the SCRA have been invaluable and invigorating. Membership provides new ideas and strategies for research and action that benefit people and improve institutions and communities. The Society for Community Research and Action was founded on the idea that social systems and environmental influences are important foci for enhancing wellness via preventive research and interventions.

**The SCRA Mission:** The Society is devoted to advancing theory, research and social action to promote positive well-being, increase empowerment, and prevent the development of problems of communities, groups and individuals. The action and research agenda of the field is guided by three broad principles. Community research and action is an active collaboration between researchers, practitioners and community members and utilizes multiple methodologies. Human competencies and problems are best understood by viewing people within their social, cultural and historical context. Change strategies are needed at both the individual and systems levels for effective competence promotion and problem prevention.

#### **SCRA Goals:**

- To promote the use of social and behavioral sciences for the well-being of people and their communities;
- To promote theory development and research that increase our understanding of human behavior in its social context;
- To encourage the exchange of knowledge and skills in community research and action.

## SCRA INTERNET LISTSERVS:

The **SCRA Listserv** enables SCRA members and others to send and receive information and comment about various topics of interest such as job postings, grant opportunities, and upcoming SCRA events.

The **SCRA Women's Listserv** enables SCRA members and others to send and receive information and comment about issues relating to SCRA women and women's events. It is the main communication network for the SCRA Committee on Women.

The **SCRA Student Listserv** is student initiated and student maintained. The Student Listserv enables SCRA members and others to send and receive information and comment about issues relating to SCRA students and student events. It has mostly been used to share information on jobs, postdocs, etc...

**SCRA Students of Color Listserv** was established as part of our first order of business at the students of color meeting at the 1999 SCRA conference. Similar to the purposes of forming our group, this listserve is to provide a forum for support, resources, and collaboration among students of color (SOC) in community research and action, as well as promotion and advocacy activities on various issues relevant to us. We're still a fairly small group so when you sign on, introduce yourself and provide some info on your organization/ affiliation, professional area/interests, what you'd like to see from SOC, and anything else you feel is relevant.

**SCRA Community Psychology, Spirituality, and Religion Listserv:** Over the past several years there has been a growth of interest in issues of spirituality and religion as they relate to community psychology.

### Sampling of books related to Community Psychology

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