

## Book Review

International community psychology: history and theories  
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### **International community psychology: An essay review**

This edited volume is the result of discussions at the last but one biennial SCRA conference in New Mexico. It consists of 22 chapters written by authors from Latin America, Europe and the Middle East, Asia-Pacific, Africa and North America with an introduction and summary/analysis written by the editors. Each chapter is a description of the origins of community psychology (CP) in a country or region, its theoretical development, some of the practices and future directions. The diversity in all of these aspects reflects a sense of vigour and concern for social justice.

I will not try to elaborate all of the chapters, but in general terms it is very refreshing to see that there is little of the US-centric rhetoric that dominates much of the CP literature. It is very pleasing, for example, that the US chapter is written from a refreshing feminist perspective and not by some tired old male academic. This puts much of the work in perspective. While the Swampscott conference is cited by many textbooks as the origin of CP, we find that in many countries what became to be recognised as CP actually arose in response to local social issues and oppression. CP theory was a retro fit in many cases and the local concerns drove the nature of the expression of CP. There are a few notable exceptions, these being the USA (naturally) and Australia (with our cultural cringe reflecting in the development of CP here).

The book is dedicated to all the community psychologists around the world who struggle to promote well-being and liberation from oppression. While this is a common theme, the issues differ from chapter to chapter, as does the notion and structure of community. For example in Cameroon (Nsamenang, Fru & Browne) the notion of community has developed is from village type communities characterised by collective mutual assistance, through colonial impositions of European notions of community as a civilising contribution to "backward" Africa, to a service related outreach concept, and finally to human services psychology developing as an academic discipline for community-based practitioners. The authors point out that there is some conflict between the African-centric approach to serving social needs through indigenous communitarianism and what they label as the Ivory Tower approach of academic CP. The academic CP, as framed by the Swampscott conference, is interventionist and they argue that fails to recognise the existing communitarian activities, and thus reflects a latent colonial attitude. They present an important dialogue essential to understanding participation as integration of indigenous social systems and CP theory and practice.

In many regions community based activities preceded the development of US CP. These activities focused on resisting or

reacting to a legacy of colonialism and/or indigenous power inequalities. CP has become a convenient label that allows conversation between different researchers and professionals across the world. This conversation has at least two important functions. One is to empower researchers and practitioners through a collective identity. The second is that cultural and historical differences allow the discipline opportunities to reflect and thus continue to develop theory through critical thought.

Montero and Díaz discuss social-CP in Latin America and point out that much of the development started in the 1970s. They acknowledge the importance of Marxism. Although only briefly acknowledged, is the impact of Vatican II and liberation theology. Kurt Lewin's influence is also significant. Montero and Diaz put together a very important summary of the developments of CP identifying such antecedents such as the social sciences approach to communities and the militant and engaged critical research in sociology and adult education in the period 1955 to 1974. Following that were the creation of participatory methods and in 1977 the term participatory action research was coined to denote a participatory style of research that had been undertaken since the 1950s. In the early 1980s liberation theology informed most of Latin American CP. Then in the mid-80s there was discussion on the practice of community strengthening and empowerment. In the late 80s through to the mid-90s there was a deconstruction and analysis of the notions of power. This led to a greater emphasis on understanding the epistemological and ontological bases of CP and critical theory in general. Also important in the 90s was the emergence of consideration of emotion. The authors of this chapter make the important point that the emergent CPs reflect local history, thinking and issues (and a general philosophy that is a mixture of local indigenous understandings, European culture, and a radicalised and socialist Catholic religion, Smart, 1999). Montero and Díaz go

further to suggest that the differences between CPs across the globe offer opportunities for insights based on the contrasts of social and historical contexts and the nature of the development of the discipline.

The chapter on CP in New Zealand by Robertson and Masters-Awatere is significant given the close ties between New Zealand and Australian CP. The differences in origins and practices are important for CPs both sides of the 'ditch'. CP in New Zealand had its origins at least 15 years before Swampscott. The importance of the treatment of Maori cannot be under emphasised. The development of CP has been informed by the social movements of Maori from the Treaty of Waitangi through to the re-emergence of Maori culture. The authors acknowledge that while the term CP was imported directly from the United States, the theoretical roots of the field are its own and were more related to social conditions in New Zealand.

This book represents a rich source of information about CP as practised across the world. While the editors point out that fundamental notions such as community do not necessarily exist in all cultures, what is loosely described as CP in various places has significantly communality to make a collection like this useful. In trying to summarise the similarities and differences across the world they had knowledge that it is a difficult process but they do quote the British authors (Burton, Boyle, Harris & Kagan) who see CP as "a framework for working with those marginalised by social systems that leads to self-aware change with an emphasis on value-based, participatory work and forging alliances." They reflect Dalton, Elias and Wandersman's (2001) comments that CP "concerns the relationships of individual to communities and societies. Through collaborative research and action, community psychologists seek to understand and enhance the quality of life for individuals, community, and society". What

is clear from their summary is that differentials in, and (mis)use of power, has led to the rise of CP in very many places. CP often grew out of NGOs and other community based work, either indigenous or as service provision. There is a general recognition that the struggle against oppressive forces is a central defining feature of CP. While there is still considerable diversity across the world in terms of what CP is, how it is defined, its history and practices what is notable about this book is that the editors have been able to find 22 sets of authors who are able to engage in conversation about the nature of their work and the work of colleagues in terms that is understandable to all those people who label themselves community psychologists

The editors noted that CP arose out of a critical reflection, mainly through social psychology, of what anthropologist and sociologists had been doing for some time. This observation seems to be true for many of the regions reported. It does raise the critical issue though and that the place of theory in CP. Sarason (1982) made the comment that he felt that American psychology had been poorly served by an obsession with the theory. At some levels this is reflected in this book. The editors emphasise the fact that this book represents a conversation between researchers and practitioners from various parts of the world. It is somewhat unfortunate that the language of that conversation is dominated by the US lexicon, as the editors discuss in the concluding chapter. Many of the chapters reflect the development of what might be better called psychology (or social psychology) in the community, where the role is in keeping with Reiff's (1968) concept of the participant conceptualiser; someone working in the community, with the community, but retaining a reflective stance. There is a paradox that the theoretical developments of notions of empowerment and participation, for example, have been dominated by US academics. In seeking to provide a language for mobilising and working with indigenous community

structures, the rest of the world has borrowed a language of US CP. For example, the US notion of empowerment, although framed in concepts like participation, capacity building and engagement reflects the desire to work *with* communities, the language still has the nuance of professional intervention.

While there are references to critical theory in the development of CP, the need for critical stance this is only argued for more overtly in a few chapters, such as from the US, Germany, Italy and in the editors summary, for example. The US chapter (Angelique & Culley) is interesting in that it is presented from a feminist perspective and has the ring of critical theory embedded in it. The importance of maintaining a critical perspective is not elaborated as this frequently as it should. CP arose out of critical thought and needs to maintain that perspective, as David Fryer frequently reminds us. It is also emphasises the importance of understanding, and being critical, of our values and worldviews. Just as these psychological phenomena are useful in deconstructing the nature of social issues they should also be tools for understanding our role in society.

A glaring example of the opportunities a collection of essays like the ones presented here is a critical deconstruction of the notion of community. The issue of what constitutes community is addressed by a number of chapter authors and is reiterated in the summary. Implicit in much of the writing is that the received wisdom about community is based on European and North American notions. Even in Turkey, Degirmencioglu points out that the concept of community has been tainted historically by the rapid secularisation imposed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and community was associated with banned religious communities. Even here the issue of the term is seen as important. In many cases the concept of community arose as a juxtaposition to dictatorship or oppression, as

in Latin America (Montero & Díaz; Saforcada et al.), Spain (Martin & López) and South Africa (Bhana, Petersen & Rochat), for example. In Greece CP is thought of as 'going into the community', as a process (Triliva & Marvakis). In Norway, community is the dumping ground for de-institutionalisation (Carlquist, Nafstad & Blakar). Francescato, Arcidiacono, Albanesi and Mannarini do embark on a definition of community and provide a voice of where one useful debate can occur. It is unfortunate that North American notions of community dominate usage as it does not serve critical debate well. As a discipline we need to address our assumptions about community. It appears to be largely an all embracing term which is not well understood. It appears to be a word that is well understood at a preconscious level, yet is not well articulated in theory. Cultural insights from the 22 regions could provide a valuable way to deconstruct the notion of community as Dudgeon, Mallard, Oxenham and Fielder (2002) indicated. A good place to begin this potential research program would be for a careful analysis of how the term is used throughout this book.

It would be unfair and inappropriate to judgmental of the editors for not addressing such issues as the aim was to explore the diversity of the discipline across the globe. The structure and space limit what can be achieved. Rather this book provides insights into the varieties of approaches that have become known as CP. It is a robust book and is in terms of what it sets out to do, it does it well.

### References

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