Community Psychology and Public Policy:
Research, Advocacy and Training in International Contexts

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Abstract

We introduce a special issue on public policy research, advocacy, and training by community psychologists that grew out of the Fifth International Community Psychology Conference held in Fortaleza, Brazil. Two papers from Portugal propose changes in sex education policies in schools and communities to promote adolescents' rights and drug abuse policies based on decriminalization of use and possession, risk and harm reduction, and health promotion. An article from Spain addresses transformative policies to reduce public health disparities for the Roma population in that country. Three contributions from Brazil examine a Landless Workers Movement popular education and agroforestry project to support children and adolescents' rights and participation; another social movement to control public policy on youth and adult literacy and education; and racist environmental and natural resource policies that ignore the territorial rights of indigenous Amazonian populations. A paper from Chile describes the creation of a regular public forum to reduce stigma and promote human rights in community mental health care. Another paper examines the development and presents examples of social-community psychologists' involvement in policy work in Puerto Rico, the process of training students for this endeavor and how to improve training. Finally, three articles cover recent trends in policy advocacy by community psychologists in the United States including its promotion and capacity building by the Society for Community Research and Action; using social media as a tool to enhance effectiveness of advocacy efforts; and an assessment of advocates' and legislators' capacity, knowledge, and perceptions of child injury prevention to inform policy change efforts.

Introduction to the Special Issue

This issue arose from a symposium entitled "Public Policy and Community Psychology: Methods of Training, Research and Practice in Different Global Regions" organized by the Public Policy Committee of the Society for Community Research and Action at the Fifth International Conference on Community Psychology in Fortaleza, Brazil. That session explored the challenges of increasing both the frequency and the impact of community psychologists' policy work around the globe. It followed up on a similar symposium held at the prior International Conference in Barcelona, Spain in 2012, which led to a special issue of the *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* (http://www.gjcpp.org/en/index.php?issue=

14) on international policy work (edited by Ken Maton). For this new issue we called for submissions on (1) training for policy work at any level: high school, college, graduate, adult volunteers, continuing education; (2) theory or research on policy issues or policy engagement; or (3) examples of advocacy practice or interventions for policy change. Accepted full articles appear in English, Portuguese, or Spanish, but all include an English abstract. While the focus is on community psychology policy work in Portugal, Spain, Brazil, Chile, Puerto Rico, and the United States (U.S.), the policy targets vary from local to provincial to national to international.

The collection of papers deals with the development of training and implementation

of policy research and advocacy by community psychologists, working with a wide variety of groups, including children, youth and adults. The papers also engage with diverse settings, from urban contexts to deprived urban peripheries and rural contexts, such as an agrarian reform settlement in Brazil. Additionally, there is a wide range of policy topics covered in this issue, including health, education, community development and the environment, and advocacy processes and capacity building more generally. Health-related projects include liberalizing drug policies and school and community-based sex education policies in Portugal, transformative policies to reduce public health disparities for Roma communities in Spain, and policy education and advocacy on child injury prevention in the U.S. state of South Carolina. The stigma of mental illness is a global struggle (as is inclusion of mental health as a fully implemented part of health plans and policies) and Chilean authors describe the creation of a regular public forum to reduce stigma and promote human rights in community mental health care. In addition to sex education, educational policies include a social movement to control public policy on youth and adult literacy and popular education among landless workers in Brazil. Community development and environmental policies include that same landless workers popular education project which also involves agroforestry and supports children and adolescents' rights and participation; and another Brazilian paper critiquing racist environmental and natural resource policies that ignore the territorial rights of indigenous Amazonian populations. Contributions that focus more generally on developing the capacity and effectiveness of policy research and advocacy by community psychology students and professionals include how training for policy work has improved in recent years in Puerto Rico and the U.S. along with ideas for making further improvements

in promotion and capacity building for political work, such as the use of social media as a tool to enhance effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

Summary of Articles

In the "Impact of Public Policy for the Promotion of Sex Education: The Portuguese Case," Rocha and Duarte use Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to frame their discussion (in Portuguese) of changes in school-based sex education policies in Portugal, revealing how chrono- and macrosystem changes impact, both positively and negatively, at the meso- and microsystem levels. Their analysis reveals how the apparently positive trend towards community partnerships does not guarantee the establishment of genuine collaborations between schools and community organizations, and might even reinforce a vision of sex education strictly as a health problem. As a result, they advocate for a broader vision of sex education that genuinely involves schools and communities in promoting adolescents' rights to sexuality.

In "The construction of public policy in the field of drugs: Health standards, territorial pacification and low-threshold psychology," Mata and Fernandes discuss (in Portuguese) how public policies on drugs in Portugal evolved from the understanding of drug use as a disease towards an emphasis on risk and harm reduction accompanied by the decriminalization of use and possession of all illicit drugs. Similarly to the policies on sex education, this change also created the conditions for the development of community-based interventions in what the authors designate as "psychotropic territories." The authors underscore the positive impact of these new policies that recognize drug users as actors in the development and implementation of health promotion interventions – an engagement that is reinforced by the option for a "low-

threshold psychology" that values active listening and unconditional acceptance. However, they also point out the risks in terms of promoting a real community empowerment, given the depth and amount of social problems faced daily by these communities.

In "The Challenge of Equity in Health Policies Aimed at the Roma Population in Spain" (in Spanish) García-Ramírez and colleagues examine how community psychologists have contributed to transformative public health policy-making. Health disparities between the Roma and the rest of the European population are viewed as a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) and have led the International Organization for Migration to create the Equi-Health Project (http://equi-health.eea.iom.int/) with the aim of reorienting health policies for the Roma toward greater equity and social justice. Outcomes of its implementation in Spain include (1) making the strengths of community psychology more visible for use in public health policy innovations; (2) raising awareness of community psychologists' commitment to assist oppressed groups; and (3) demonstrating community researchers' ability to help improve health policies and their administration.

The paper "Community practice and the work of 'Landless Workers' Movement' (MST) with children and adolescents in Ribeirão Preto/SP - Brazil" (in Portuguese) by Ana Paula Soares da Silva and colleagues considers another community in severe deprivation but in a rural context: an agrarian reform settlement of the Landless Workers Movement located in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. The authors describe and discuss a five-year project of research group LAPSAPE that involved training with popular educators with the goal to promote education policies that would support children and adolescents' rights. The project involved participation of adults, children and adolescents in the agroforestry

project of the settlement and resulted in actual changes in municipal policies. Additionally, the authors discuss how this experience influenced the identity of popular educators as child educators and also the community perception of childhood and adolescence with a growing advocacy of children's and adolescents' rights to protection, education and participation.

The focus of the paper "Democracy, Social Participation and Social Control of Public Policy in Brazil" (in Portuguese) by Burgos, Coimbra and Ferreira is the social movement of the Forums for the Education of Young People and Adults of Brazil and their role in shaping state policies in the field of youth and adult education. Despite literacy and the education of young people and adults being a public policy priority, there are still high levels of illiteracy among young people and adults in this region. The forums involve a diversity of individuals, from students to teachers or researchers, plus civil society organizations and municipal-level government agencies. The goal is to advocate for the improvement and implementation of youth and adult education policies, but also to exert a collective social influence towards these policies by discussing and pressing for changes. In this sense, the forums are a social movement committed to promoting the quality of youth and adult education.

The paper "Environmental racism and struggles for recognition of people in the Amazon forest" by Alessandro dos Santos and colleagues (in Portuguese) denounces how race and ethnicity have been a basis for inequality and discrimination in environmental public policies with severe consequences for the people living in the Amazon. In fact, the management of natural resources has not taken into account the territorial rights of traditional Amazonian populations, with severe consequences in terms of their access to land, their quality of life and environmental justice as a whole. This

is why environmental racism, as a counter-hegemonic concept, can be useful for local populations and activists, but also for those involved in community intervention and public policy, as a marker for advocating the need for the recognition and the redistribution of environmental rights for traditional Amazonian populations.

In "Anti-stigma Practices as the Linchpin of Community Work in Mental Health" (in Spanish), Chilean authors Grandón Fernández et al. address the human rights of psychiatric patients through a program designed to reduce the stigma of mental illness. A community mental health rehabilitation center runs annual destigmatizaton sessions aimed to generate reflection, debate and a space in which participants can synergistically share their experiences and ideas for fighting stigma and protecting the rights of people with mental illness. The program is based on qualitative research engaging the participation of local community members along with the center management team. The effectiveness of this inclusive model has been found through the documentation of experiences of discrimination and stigma and the promotion of clients' rights; the creation of new spaces to promote human rights in mental health; and strategic alliances with health networks, higher education, foundations, and member organizations of people with psychiatric diagnoses.

In "Involving psychologists in public policy in Puerto Rico: Processes and Results" (in English), Irma Serrano-García and Eduardo Lugo-Hernández describe how psychologists in the social-community psychology program at the University of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rico Psychology Association (PRPA) have become more systematically involved in policy issues. Psychologists who do not participate in policy work gave one of three reasons: lack of time or lack of training or negative perception of party politics. But an increasing number of psychologists in Puerto Rico are engaging in public policy initiatives through collaborations with the PRPA and other nongovernmental organizations and government agencies. Although research was able to identify few graduate courses focused on policy analysis or advocacy skills, the authors provide information on ways psychologists and students have learned from individuals who serve as policy work role models and ideas for making policy training more systematic, and to increase and psychologists' involvement in public policy.

In "The SCRA Public Policy Committee in Action: Advocacy, Collaboration, and Capacity-Building" (in English), Maryman et al. outline the increase in policy-related activity in recent years by the international, but U.S.-based, Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA). Its Public Policy Committee addresses local, state and national policies relevant to community psychology through the development and dissemination (through *The Community Psychologist (TCP)*, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, the SCRA website and listserv) of position statements, rapid-response calls to action on specific policy initiatives, and through advocacy campaigns. Both the more deliberative position statements (which may be developed by special task forces, such as current ones on the problems of mass incarceration, immigration reform, and global climate change) and urgent calls to action are sometimes in collaboration with the American Psychological Association (APA), the National Prevention Science Coalition, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and other APA divisions, or other organizations. The Public Policy Committee also engages in advocacy training, student policy internships, and other capacity building activities, including a short course in policy work and an advocacy training day held at the U.S. Congress (in concert with SPSSI). Additional resources include the

annual SCRA Public Policy Small Grants Program, SCRA member surveys on policy work, and a *TCP* column and conference track. One area needing further development in SCRA is international awareness and collaboration, and the policy symposiums at recent international conferences and these policy issues in the *Global Journal* represent efforts toward that development.

In "Using Social Media as a Tool to Complement Advocacy Efforts" (in English), Scott and Maryman provide a valuable review and analysis of how internet-based, interactive social network forums, such as Facebook and Twitter, can be leveraged by community researchers, practitioners and students to widely, immediately, and efficiently promote and mobilize advocacy campaigns and information. They note social media fits well with community psychology's principles of citizen participation and empowerment, collaborative social change, social support, and sense of community. They add an important caution that social media is unlikely to be effective if it is the only tool used in a policy initiative; instead it should be used to amplify other political organizing strategies. A helpful appendix reviews the relative strengths and weaknesses of several popular social media platforms and tools.

In "Influencing Prevention Policy Through Effective Communication with Advocates and Legislators" (in English), Melissa Strompolis and colleagues present an example of a state-level (South Carolina, U.S.) policy education campaign on the issue of child injury prevention as accidents are the leading cause of pediatric mortality in the state. The campaign and the survey they report were aimed, not at the general public, but at those with the most political clout: i.e., professional advocates, legislators, and legislative staff. Respondents' knowledge of injury prevention facts were surprisingly inconsistent, especially as one would expect advocates, law-makers and staffers to be well informed.

This finding reinforces the need for effective and targeted education strategies as part of advocacy campaigns. Fortunately, issue education is something nonprofit organizations of all kinds are allowed to engage in without having to worry about violating tax exemption rules. There is nothing like teaching a topic to learn it better oneself, so advocates and other staff who learn about the policy issue will build human capital and organizational capacity in the process. Thus the statewide coalition the authors represent organized a training session on effective advocacy strategies and tactics, child vehicular safety laws, and legislative talking points. Coalition members then used the information at a lobbying event organized at the South Carolina statehouse, which led to pledges from legislators to introduce or co-sponsor child safety legal guidelines.

Conclusions

The strong and encouraging response to the two International Conference sessions and two special issues of this journal on public policy research, advocacy practice, and training by community psychologists around the globe, as well as the variety of examples in public physical and health, education, community development and environmental protection, demonstrate that policy work in community psychology is vital, vibrant and expanding, both geographically and topically. Although this special issue samples policy issues and efforts by community psychologists in several different countries, it does not include important areas of policy work, especially *inherently international policies*, such as those affecting climate change and that provoke wars and widespread violence while causing extreme poverty that forces millions of people to be displaced and shortens the life spans of entire communities. The neoliberal, pro-global capital-market policies that are restricting services and rights of citizens are also an

example of this. We know that community psychologists are working on those topics with social scientists from other branches of psychology and other disciplines, and with policy-makers, professionals, and community activists and advocates.

This special issue reflects the collaboration of colleagues from multiple disciplines worldwide. This has been possible thanks to the hosts of the International Conference of Community Psychology. This conference is an example of how the alliance of societies and academies of community psychology around the world can provide a global perspective to the efforts that community psychologists make to promote public policies based on equity and social justice.

So we hope all of those examples of international policy-focused collaboration receive the attention they deserve in this and other journals and conferences. We further hope that community psychologists around the world take encouragement from this issue and the various other resources identified in several of the articles to keep up the difficult, often frustrating, but ultimately crucial and rewarding work of influencing political solutions to community, societal, and international problems.

Editor's Note

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