Training for a New Profession: Research as Social Action

This article presents an approach to training and professional practice in community psychology that dispenses with the dichotomy between research and practice. In this approach, problem definition is stimulated by community needs, research is seen as a tool for social action, value issues are made explicit, and research products are oriented toward use by community groups and agencies. Implications for changes in training strategies and sites required by the model are considered.

Newbrough (1974) has wisely suggested that community psychologists must move beyond discussions of the definition of community psychology. The alternative offered us is to become problem focused. But merely focusing on particular types of problems will not resolve whatever professional identity issues or questions about graduate training remain. Problems of human services improvement and planning for the future are, of course, not the property of community psychology but belong to society in general. Community psychology will certainly not solve these problems alone, nor does focusing on them make the profession unique.

We would like to suggest that the next step is to ask, How will community psychology address itself to these problems? For it is how these problems are attacked by community psychologists that can and should distinguish their work from that of other professional groups. The approach proposed in this paper requires first that we dispense with some false dichotomies we have inherited as part of our academic legacy. Doing so will allow us to develop a distinctive new role in which research, theory, and values are central in the solving of important social problems.

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Consequences of Separating Research and Practice

The most important dichotomy to be dispensed with is that between research and practice. Most other service-oriented professions have retained this distinction, often with unfortunate results. Clinical psychology's long and ambivalent affair with the model of scientist-practitioner provides a case in point. Although there are notable exceptions, clinical psychology produced its share of practitioners and its share of scientists but few who successfully functioned in both roles. Even fewer were those who were able to combine in a meaningful way their research interests with those of their practice. The reason for this, we suspect, is that graduate training provided students with conceptions of research and practice that were largely incompatible. Control groups, analyses of variance, and the other tools of research as they are taught even today are simply inconsistent with practice, which largely involves intensive contact with individuals for long periods of time.

A similar case is the field of education. Seventy years ago, emerging schools and departments of education began distinguishing between "scholars" and "practitioners." The scholars were preoccupied with philosophy, theory, and later, research; the practitioners concentrated on method and technique. The division of labor was built into the curriculum and the faculty structure of the education schools. Eventually, the scholars and the practitioners in the same department ceased even to talk to one another. Each held the other in utter disdain. A false dichotomy became real, and society has been the victim.

Fortunately, we are present at the creation of a new profession and are in a position to decide whether we wish to create two breeds of community psychologist — researchers in one camp and practitioners in the other, each of whom feels alienated from the other.

Some Characteristics of Research as Social Action

Those of us who are responsible for the training of community psychologists have a clear choice. We may continue to accept the distinction between research and practice and to shape our training programs accordingly, or we may encourage and develop a very different role for community psychologists, one that avoids the scientist-practitioner split by developing both a new model of research and a new model of practice. In all likelihood the result of the former approach will be the perpetuation of the "two cultures" — the detached researcher and the beleaguered practitioner (Denner & Price, 1973). We will continue to produce students who either have found their research experience in graduate school so alienating that they withdraw from the enterprise of systematic inquiry for the rest of their
professional lives or who find research as it is currently taught intellectually satisfying but find it more comfortable not to confront the "messy" problems that are to be found in the community context.

The alternative approach to the role of the community psychologist has as a basic premise the idea that the systematic gathering of information about a problem in the community or in a human service agency is the most practical thing in the world that a community psychologist could be doing. This is not research for its own sake but research that reduces the uncertainty about pressing decisions that must be made on a day-to-day basis. Let us spell out some of the characteristics of this role for community psychologists.

1. **Problem formulation is stimulated by community needs.** Problem formulation begins with the perception of a real need in a community setting. This may be a need that is perceived by members of that setting, by community psychologists, or, more likely, by both. The important point is that the research enterprise is not merely an exercise in hypothesis testing or methodological development. It is instead an attempt to use our knowledge and skills to deal with existing or anticipated needs of community groups or settings. Newbrough's (1974) call for community psychologists to become problem focused rather than identity focused is quite consistent with this idea.

2. **Theory serves as a means, not just as an end.** In much of the field of psychology the goal of research is the further development of theory. This is, of course, a legitimate and worthwhile goal. However, if problem formulation is stimulated by community needs, then theory becomes a means rather than an end, a tool for broadening our understanding of specific instances of problems and their larger implications. Even as we recognize that frequently attempts to solve practical problems do contribute to theory development (Garner, 1972), so can theory in itself be a guide for anticipating future events, and a much needed framework for structuring complex situations.

3. **Research is a tool for social action.** Like theory, research for community psychology is a tool rather than an isolated pursuit. It is a practical means of assessing needs and choosing the most effective available course of action. The community researcher recognizes that it is not enough to choose a "relevant" problem. Informed and effective social action directed at relieving a specific problem requires the systematic collection of information. To fail to do research in this sense is to fail to do justice to the problem. Although community psychologists can and should use other skills, it is the utilization of research that distinguishes us from other social activists. Also, in defining research (broadly defined, of course) as our most
important practice technique, we do much to eliminate the schism between
science and action.

4. Value issues are made explicit. Professional work in community psychol-
yogy does not bury the question of values but brings it to center stage, where
it ought to be. Along with community needs, it is basic social values that
primarily define the community psychologist's interests and provide the
criteria by which the work is evaluated. The motivation for doing this sort
of work is precisely that it allows us to attempt to reduce the discrepancy
between conditions as they currently are and conditions as they ought to be.
In this crucial way, the community psychologist differs from other univer-
sity-trained professionals concerned with the interaction of social systems
and the individual. We recognize that our work is not value free but value
laden. And we also recognize that this is not a reason to withdraw from the
enterprise but the best of all possible reasons to engage ourselves deeply in
it. By making our value orientation explicit in our work, we also acknowl-
dge one of the most important reasons that many of our students have
chosen community psychology as a profession. They are, for the most part,
people who wish to improve the quality of life in society and perceive
striking discrepancies between what currently is and what ought to be.

5. The community psychologist's research yields useful products. Our research
seldom has a journal article as its sole product. The product may vary
depending on the problem under consideration and the goals and values of
the research. It may be a training manual, a new administrative or evalu-
tive system, the development of a new role for professionals, a new set of
skills for people working in a human service agency, or even a new kind of
institution. The important point here is that the product is a concrete
embodiment of an attempt to solve a real social problem.

This characteristic has some interesting implications for the reward
systems currently operating in most universities. It may be that in order to
encourage this sort of research, university-based community psychology
training programs will have to argue strongly that, as Raush (1974) sug-
gested, dissertation research can take very different forms than is currently
the case. And, if faculty members are to be in a position to provide
adequate role models for their students, it may be that university depart-
ments will have to reexamine their criteria for academic advancement.

Those criteria are based on strongly held values about what the univer-
sity should be. One hundred years ago, any university course that taught
more than "the classics" was suspect, and any teaching that was at all
"practical" was deemed ungentlemanly and inconsistent with the academy's
sacred traditions (Cherniss, 1973). As Nisbet (1971) has noted, the other-
worldly scholar, engaged in esoteric studies lacking any practical value, was
often held in the highest esteem in the traditional university. Today, the
world has changed and so has the university. University faculty continue to esteem a "pure" scholarship produced for an elite group of fellow scholars and privileged students, but what is now acceptable in both the curriculum and the scholarly endeavor itself is much broader than it once was. Nevertheless, if community psychologists are to legitimately produce different kinds of products, as we advocate, certain academic norms and institutional reward structures must be challenged and more change must occur.

6. The community psychologist maintains a stance of giving rather than taking from the field setting. Psychology (and social science in general) has a long and unenviable history of taking from the field settings in which it conducts its research. This taking has a number of different forms including the use of agency staff or client time and effort for research projects that have no demonstrable benefit for the agency or its clients. The community psychologist, on the other hand, understands from the beginning that one of the primary purposes of the work in which he or she is engaged is to provide the agency with a product or service that it needs. And one of the most important measures of the success of the research enterprise has to do with whether the product of that research actually enhances the functioning of the setting.

7. Demonstration must lead to adoption and use. Ideally, the community psychologist does not merely demonstrate that the method or procedure that has been developed is preferable to the current mode of operation of the setting. Instead, the plan from the beginning is to institutionalize the innovation so that it becomes part of the operation of the setting (Levine, 1970). Although it is usually of critical importance to demonstrate the increased effectiveness of a new program or procedure, the demonstration by itself will seldom encourage workers in the setting to adopt it. The social and technical problems surrounding the adoption of an innovation can themselves, then, become an important target for research by community psychologists.

8. Evaluation of social action as an ethical imperative. In discussing these aspects of the community psychologist's role, we have been arguing that there should be no distinction between practitioner and researcher. Some of our remarks have pointed up the practical reasons for avoiding the distinction. There is, however, also a compelling ethical reason for community-based psychologists to function both as agents of social change and as evaluators of that change. In laboratory-based hypothesis-testing research, if an investigator fails to provide criteria adequate for measuring the impact of experimental manipulations, all that is likely to be lost is time and effort. If, on the other hand, the community action researcher fails to provide a basis adequate for measuring the impact of an intervention, the well-being of people in the community can be significantly affected.
We believe that the principles we have put forth eliminate much of the gap between researcher and practitioner. Both the university-based and agency-based community psychologists are concerned with the same problems, address those problems in the same way, and are guided by the same values. There may be some differences in specific duties, but whatever the setting, the community psychologist functions as a community action researcher.

It should also be clear that the role we are describing is not restricted to the graduates of doctoral programs. On the contrary, if it is true that the systematic gathering of information about a problem in the community is the most practical role for community workers, then there will probably never be enough doctoral-level psychologists available to serve this function. The skills necessary to engage in this work can and should be learned and used by bachelor's- and master's-level community workers as well.

The role of community action researcher outlined above can be distinguished from other roles now assumed by psychologists. Basic research refers to a role in which the problem is defined by theory rather than community needs and social values. The final product is a scholarly journal article or book written for other scholars. Social action, another role assumed by psychologists, is one in which the work is guided by a concern for community needs and social values and the intended outcome is a useful product. However, this role does not involve the explicit use of theory as a guide to action, nor does it involve research (broadly defined as the systematic collection of information). Administrators, consultants, and community organizers function primarily in a social action role.

Yet another role assumed by many psychologists today is individual remediation. Like social action, this role involves problem-focused work guided primarily by practical considerations. Research is not a major part of the role. Unlike social action or community action research, however, individual remediation is concerned with problem solving and change in individuals rather than in social systems. Most clinical psychologists function as individual remediators when engaged in psychotherapy.

Although we believe that of all these roles community action research is the most exciting and potentially useful, we do not wish to argue that the other roles should be abandoned by psychologists. We simply wish to advocate that community psychology should adopt community action research as the field's distinctive modus operandi.

Some Examples

Thus far we have been dealing largely in generalities. As helpful as they may seem to some of us, some concrete examples from our students' own
work are even more compelling. The student projects we describe illustrate to varying degrees the characteristics of community psychologists as we have described them.

One of our students has developed an evaluation system to focus on the training of correctional personnel in a large state training center. It seemed to him that substantial gaps existed between the sort of training that correctional personnel were receiving and the kinds of demands that were placed on them in their actual work. Program evaluation skills, as well as a solid theoretical background in professional socialization, helped to illuminate that problem. One of the final products of this project was a set of recommendations for improvements in the training program. Another product was a system that allows the training program administrators to continue to evaluate the program in the future and to respond appropriately to changing needs in the correctional field. This project is a good example of one that begins with a current community need relating to important social values, uses psychological theory and empirical data collection methods to address the need, and results in concrete products that will remain in the community system when the project is completed.

Another joint faculty–student project has involved the development and testing of a data-guided program development procedure for halfway houses and group homes for delinquent youth. The procedure could not have been developed without the active collaboration of both residents and staff in the setting. Its effectiveness as an organizational development tool is largely a result of the fact that it was developed in collaboration with the consumers themselves.

Still another of our students was concerned with how mental health facilities in predominantly minority communities respond to the several needs of community members. Having found such an agency in the process of reorganization, he conducted an assessment of community needs as perceived by agency staff and community groups. Measures of agency functioning were obtained before and after the needs assessment. Thus, not only was critical information supplied to the agency but the project provided a unique opportunity to observe a human service organization in the process of adapting to community needs.

Finally, action research has become part of our own program in the form of a self-evaluation system. A detailed account of the development of that system is now available (Clay, Kirkhart, Schulman, Ketterer, & Price, Note 1). Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of this piece of action research was that even within our own program, evaluation team members were viewed as "outside evaluators" until program members identified their needs for evaluation data and the team made explicit its stance of "giving" its services to the program rather than "evaluating" it.
We are finding that this experience embodies in various forms nearly all of the characteristics of research as social action that we have described. Students and faculty alike are learning that the process in which they are involved requires a blend of both research sophistication and practitioner skills.

Some Implications for Training

In case after case we find that our students teach us as much as we teach them. We have learned to trust their instincts about what constitutes an important problem. In turn, we have tried to give them the best of what the university has to offer: a willingness to ask searching questions, a demand for rigor and thoroughness, and an insistence on hard evidence and closely reasoned analysis. In all cases, however, we have found that an openness to our students' goals and motivations for doing action research in the community has meant that the research is not just rigorous but also retains its original fidelity to the needs of the setting in which it was conducted.

We also believe that the mode of functioning for community psychologists that we are advocating requires that faculty members responsible for training will have to abandon some of their ideas about how training is best conducted. It may be that the best way to teach these skills is actually to participate with students in the project rather than to supervise from behind a desk. This sort of participatory training model yields a number of advantages including a shared sense of immediacy about institutional pressures and resistance, an opportunity for faculty members to serve as models for their students, and an effective “antidote for arrogance” (Kelly, 1970) for the university-based community psychologist.

It may be, however, that faculty and students cannot embody these values in their work without institutional support. The role and process we advocate would be difficult to create either in a traditional academic department or in a service-oriented community agency with a specific mandate.

At the University of Michigan, we have been able to develop the community action research role primarily through the vehicle of a separate training program in community psychology, independent of and coequal with other departmental training programs in clinical psychology, social psychology, and the like. As a separate program, we admit our own students and have developed our own norms for excellence in dissertation research. Also, through many other fine institutes and schools located at the university (such as the Institute for Social Research, the School of Social Work, the Institute for Labor and Industrial Relations, etc.), our students and
faculty can find many receptive and knowledgeable colleagues who affirm, support, and sometimes participate in the new kind of work we are trying to do.

Nevertheless, finding adequate institutional support and resources for the role and process we advocate continues to be problematic in certain respects. Perhaps a new institution should be created, a "community field station" that would serve as an ongoing training site for community psychologists and their students. Located in a specific community, the station would create and maintain ties with various community groups and institutions. Its support staff would continuously collect data on community processes and problems. This information would suggest the specific problems that should be the focus of work initiated by faculty and their students. At any given time, several projects would be at different stages of development. Thus, students could get a larger view of the community action research process simply by being at the station and participating in the various projects. The station could clearly be a valuable resource for the community. Most important, however, the station would serve as an institutional embodiment of the values and process we have outlined above. It would provide cohesion, support, and identity for both new and experienced community psychologists. It would provide the needed institutional line between the university and the community. Through such a setting, and the process and values with which it would be identified, the promise of a new profession could be realized.

REFERENCE NOTE


REFERENCES


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