ORIGINAL PAPER

International Community Psychology: Development and Challenges

Douglas D. Perkins

Developments in International Community Psychology

Why an issue devoted to international community psychology? In some ways, such a collection is unnecessary, even for an English language readership. Professional organizations, books, chapters and articles on community psychology appeared as early as the mid-to-late-1970s in Latin America (Montero 1996), the United Kingdom (Bender 1976), Italy (Francescato 1977), and Norway (Grinde 1977). There have been journals related to the field outside the United States at least since the late 1970s-early 1980s (e.g., *Japanese Journal of Social Psychiatry*; *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*; *Critical Social Policy*: UK; *Psychology in Society*: South Africa). The number of non-US articles in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (*AJCP*) and *Journal of Community Psychology* (*JCP*) started increasing with a 1989 special issue of the former on community psychology in Asia. The *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, an international journal, and *Revista de Psicologia Social Aplicada* ("Journal of Applied Social Psychology" in Spanish) were launched in 1991, and *Intervencion Psicosocial: Revista sobre igualdad y calidad de vida* ("Psychosocial Intervention: Journal of Equality and quality of life") started in 1992.

Community psychology may have its earliest formal roots in the United States, but its ideas have early roots in many other cultures (Reich et al. 2007) and, in recent decades, it has grown faster in other parts of the world. As clinical psychologists dominate professional associations and laboratory researchers gain power in academic departments, community psychology in the US may be waning, at least as a subdiscipline of psychology, while many community psychologists (and whole programs) find homes in schools of education, other interdisciplinary units, or outside of academe.

In contrast, the future of community psychology as a distinct field now appears clearer and more promising internationally than in the US As the contributors to the recent edited volume—*International community psychology: History and theories* (Reich et al. 2007) reveal, the field has begun developing in multiple countries on every continent as a critical response to mental health system limitations and/or political repression. Many of those countries have experienced colonial and post-colonial repression. In those systems, social psychology, political theory, and post-modern (e.g., narrative and other social constructivist) and participatory action research methods have been more influential than have clinical, behavioral, cognitive, or biological theories or positivist methods.

International participation has increased, not only in *AJCP* and *JCP*, but also in SCRA conferences. Several European, Australia-Aotearoa, and other regional and national CP conferences have been held. Even France, which until recently had no community psychology movement, will host the European conference this year. There have been two major international conferences held on community psychology in Puerto Rico (2006) and Portugal (2008).

Thus, the purpose of this issue is to take stock of the field of community psychology at a critical point in its maturation as activity in the field becomes more

D. D. Perkins (✉)
Center for Community Studies, Program in Community
Research & Action, Department of Human & Organizational
Development, Peabody College #90, Vanderbilt University,
Nashville, TN 37203-5701, USA
e-mail: d.perkins@vanderbilt.edu

international in scope. The Reich et al. (2007) collection is particularly valuable for providing the breadth and historical roots of the field around the globe. The original idea of its editors was to write an article or edit a special issue of this journal on the topic. What the present issue provides, which that volume did not, are fully articulated examples of international community psychology research.

This Issue

Challenges of International Collaboration

The articles in this issue are not necessarily representative, either of the activity within community psychology in different countries or regions of the world or of the substantive focus of the field or methods used in the countries represented. Although an effort was made to solicit submissions from different continents, and geographic dispersion was one criterion for the final selection of articles, we were dependent on the papers submitted and the selection was based first and foremost on the quality of the papers. An effort was also made to have at least one reviewer from outside the US and one American reviewer for every submission, just as the issue editors were geographically dispersed: Paul Toro from the US and Sheung-Tak Cheng from Hong Kong initiated the issue; Maritza Montero from Venezuela served as the senior consulting editor throughout the whole issue; and Douglas Perkins from the US joined the editorial team to help shepherd manuscripts and reviews to decisions and completion after the issue had gotten bogged down.

The length of time the issue was in review, revision, and editorial process does reflect serious challenge the field faces in greater international collaboration. As with any issue, some reviewers were unresponsive and some authors slow to submit or revise. But no doubt some of the delays were at least in part due to, or exacerbated by, cultural barriers—different expectations, interpretations, or understandings between authors, editors, and reviewers, and even among the guest editors themselves. Just as Reich and Reich (2006) argued for interdisciplinary research and practice, effective and efficient international collaboration requires concerted and culturally competent efforts by each participant in valuing diversity, a capacity for self-reflection and honest, dispassionate assessment of oneself and one's collaborators, questioning one's own assumptions and cultural biases, and sensitivity to the inherent difficulties and frustrations of cross-cultural interaction. International collaborators must learn and practice diplomacy. While it is not always necessary to learn a foreign language to work with foreign colleagues, part of diplomacy, mutual understanding, and cultural competence is to at least try to learn as much of the native tongue of one's collaborators as possible. Finally, multinational teams must remain vigilantly aware of power differentials and dynamics and work to avoid tokenism and unnecessary hierarchies—either formal or informal. In the end, the authors represented in this issue appear to have achieved a considerable measure of those understandings and competencies and our goal is that readers may be inspired to do so as well.

The papers in this issue vary by how international the authorship is, ranging from Mak, Cheung and Law's study of their own region (Hong Kong) and Cornish and Campbell's (UK) comparison of an intervention approach in two other countries (India and South Africa) to the Dallago et al paper with six authors representing five countries (Italy, US, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom). Most of the articles represent collaborations among authors from two countries, including Hong Kong and the US (Cheng and Heller), Hong Kong and Cameroon (Cheng and Siankam), China[1] and the US (Liu et al.), Spain and the US (García-Ramírez et al.), Guatemala and the US (Putman et al.). Where an author is "from" is not always self-evident, however. Some of the authors were originally from one country and trained in another country. And most of the authors have considerable international professional knowledge and experience.

Thus, one of the goals of the issue—to present not just examples of community psychology research from different countries, but examples of international collaboration—has been achieved. Again similar to interdisciplinary work, however, how culturally competent participants are and how truly equal and shared a partnership it is may be debatable in some cases. Also similar to interdisciplinary work, however, it may be structural rather than personal, interpersonal, or cultural barriers to international collaboration that are most difficult to overcome. Programs and funding to support international visits and other exchanges, training, and collaboration, and institutional reinforcement (e.g., tenure, publication) for international work are all important.

The interdisciplinary-international connection is even more directly relevant in addressing many of these cultural competency, interpersonal, and structural challenges in that traditionally trained, intradisciplinary psychologists, and whole departments full of them, may have the most difficulty addressing all of those challenges. But with the help and influence of anthropologists and other internationally focused scholars, community psychologists may become more worldly and learn to appreciate and benefit from foreign literatures and collaborators.

---

[1] Liu, Zhang, and Zhuo are Chinese scholars working in Macau and the US.

Issue Summary

The articles selected for this issue cover an impressive diversity of topics using a variety of community research methods. The first three articles represent studies conducted in one country. The first is by psychologists (Mak, Cheung, and Law) who conducted the first ever systematic study of sense of community in Hong Kong. They used a large representative resident sample and their multilevel analysis suggest that sense of community in Hong Kong was generally unrelated to demographic indicators on either the individual or community levels, as it often has been in other countries. Less surprising was that sense of community was inversely related to daily hassles and positively associated with social support and well-being, measured in terms of quality of material and personal life, health and functioning, social and community life, and commitment.

The next article was written by three Chinese scholars (Liu in Macau, and Zhang and Zhuo based in the US) and an American community psychologist (Messner). They studied fear of crime in Tianjin, a large city near Beijing in northern China using a multi-stage neighborhood cluster sampling process. The response rate was 97% which is not uncommon for surveys conducted in China. Thus, one point of interest for survey researchers in Western countries is simply how this high level of cooperation is achieved: is it simply a cultural difference or does it suggest possible respondent bias? In testing whether physical or social disorder and vulnerability predictors of fear (consistently found in the West) is universal or dependent on cultural, political, and social change context, this study finds that the young and educated exhibit higher levels of fear of crime, which is opposite to the typical Western pattern. Liu et al. found other patterns consistent with Western literature, such as higher fear among females and victims.

The third article contrasts with the first two in that while the team of authors led by Putman focused on one country (Guatemala) and included one coauthor from that country, most of the authors are originally from, and currently based, in the US Their project examines indigenous humanitarian aid workers' exposure to violence, support needs, emotional adjustment, motivations, and rewards. They conducted two studies—a series of qualitative focus groups and a structured in-depth survey with standardized scales. Aid workers experienced an average of 13 community violence events and those exposures were related to increased Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, which in turn were related to levels of burnout or emotional exhaustion. Levels of subjective personal accomplishment were inversely related to PTSD. This project is a good example of how community psychologists can collaborate

across borders to assess needs and provide support to those on the front lines of the many resource-poor and dangerous parts of the world. The authors discuss implications for training and support of aid workers. Of course, other implications for community psychology ought to include theoretically what are the root political or economic causes of violence and practically how can we organize and mobilize politically to influence the end of violence and extreme poverty.

The next two articles each provide a comparison of communities and interventions in two or three countries: García-Ramírez et al. demonstrate a collaborative research enterprise between Spanish and US-based community and social psychologists in order to evaluate the collaborative capacity of a much larger international network of groups aiming to prevent labor discrimination toward immigrants in Spain, Belgium, and Italy. The researchers propose an empowerment evaluation process which starts by establishing a collaborative relationship among partners, then builds collaborative capacity, and ends by evaluating the collaborative capacity of the network using a tool provided at the end of the article.

Cornish and Campbell's article compares two HIV/AIDS prevention programs run by sex workers in India and South Africa in order to identify the social conditions and dynamics that promote successful community-based interventions. As results of peer education approaches worldwide have been inconsistent, their comparison of context, program implementation, and outcomes based on in-depth, ethnographic project case studies in the two countries leads them to identify key factors of success or failure. In particular, the better results of the Indian project were facilitated by a more stable and supportive social, material and political context, and a community development approach which devoted significant resources to sex workers' participation, ownership, and empowerment rather than marginalizing their concerns as occurs in traditional medical model strategies.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is also the focus of the first of two truly multinational studies analyzing data across many countries. The study by Cheng and Siankam uses available United Nations, World Bank, and World Health Organization (WHO) national health and socioeconomic development statistics and census and representative survey data to analyze the impacts of the pandemic and development patterns on the living arrangements of older persons in 23 sub-Saharan African countries. They found that a substantial number of older adults in Africa are living with grandchildren but not adult children (i.e., skipped generation households), that countries higher in HIV/AIDS prevalence had more such households and fewer older persons living with other relatives, and that countries with higher socioeconomic development had fewer older

persons living with children younger than 25 years old. They conclude that the pandemic and socioeconomic developments are accelerating the breakdown of the traditional extended family structure which is disrupting family supports for the elderly. While elders are forced to raise their orphaned grandchildren, other children also suffer the deprivation of their grandparents and in both cases, already overburdened communities, governments, and nongovernmental organizations must try to fill those gaps while rapid urbanization, slum growth, migration throughout Africa, as well as isolated conflicts pose additional community development challenges in this least resourced continent.

The other broadly multinational study is by an international team of authors led by Dallago. They use nationally representative WHO-sponsored survey data to analyze adolescent place attachment, social capital, and perceived safety in 12 countries from all areas of Europe and Israel. The data consistently support the hypothesis across the 13 countries that both boys' and girls' place attachment predicts safety, and that the relationship is mediated in part by social capital. That is not to conclude there are no differences among countries, however. Some of the most interesting findings and speculations come from comparing levels of the three community cognitions by gender and country. For example, Latvian youth felt the least safe by far and 15-year-olds from Scandinavia and Hungary felt safest. Place attachment was also strongest in several Scandinavian countries but also in Macedonia; and weakest in Latvia, the UK, and for girls in Estonia and Italy. Except in Israel and Latvia, boys felt more place attachment than did girls. There were also gender and country differences in social capital, including girls having a lower sense of social capital except in Israel. These patterns point community psychologists toward what certain countries may be doing

well (e.g., how girls are raised in Israel) and where there may be unexpected problems for youth (e.g., in Latvia).

The last article by Cheng and Heller takes the broadest international perspective by considering aging as a looming global problem, especially among the poor and disenfranchised. The authors note that community psychology has largely ignored this problem and point to the United Nations Program on Aging as a promising international policy initiative, with which community psychologists could usefully connect. They conclude that community psychology should play a greater role in promoting the conceptual, empirical, and practical work needed to change negative age stereotypes and realities around the globe.

Those still not convinced of the importance of international collaboration or even of attending to the growing global reach and range of community psychology need only read all the different topics, ideas, methods, and practical implications of the articles in this issue.

References

Bender, M. (1976). *Community psychology*. London: Methuen.

Francescato, D. (1977). *Psicologia di comunitáa* (1st ed.). Milano: Feltrinelli.

Grinde, T. V. (1977). New roles of the community psychologists in Norway. *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening, 14*(4), 1–27.

Montero, M. (1996). Parallel lives: Community psychology in Latin America and the United States. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 24*(5), 589–605.

Reich, S. M., & Reich, J. A. (2006). Cultural competence in interdisciplinary collaborations: A method for respecting diversity in research partnerships. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 38*(1–2), 51–62.

Reich, S. M., Riemer, M., Prilleltensky, I., & Montero, M. (Eds.). (2007). *International community psychology: History and theories*. New York: Springer.