

WHAT IS CRITICAL COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY?

Duncan, N, Bowman, B, Naidoo, A, Pillay, J & Roos, V (eds) (2007) **Community psychology: Analysis, context and action**. Cape Town: UCT Press.
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As a critical psychologist I aim to introduce students registered for my community psychology module to a critical approach to community psychology. I aim to demonstrate that there is an alternative to mainstream psychology and that, more specifically, there is an alternative to mainstream community psychology. In 2005 Nelson and Prilleltensky edited a text entitled **Community psychology: In pursuit of liberation and well-being**. This text provides an excellent outline to a critical approach to community psychology. It proved, however, to be too long and detailed to cover in a module that is a term long and because it is internationally published is an expensive option to prescribe in the South African context. I have, therefore, largely relied on locally published community psychology texts when teaching my module. While these books may not be specifically focused on a critical approach, many of the texts are critically orientated.

A recent locally published text is **Community psychology: Analysis, context and action**. Painter, Terre Blanche and Henderson (2006: 228) argue that much of the rhetoric of community psychology can be seen as no more than “an attempt to further the interest of a conservative psychology under radical pretences”. They go on to critique the fact that rather than presenting alternative approaches to psychology the sub-discipline of community psychology is too often used to deliver “mainstream clinical services... at ‘reduced prices’ to a different, poorer clientele” (Painter, Terre Blanche and Henderson, 2006: 228) and in this way (re)produce and maintain a mainstream, apolitical approach. They further argue that the term “community” itself has been used problematically: “whereas white, middle-class clients are envisioned and addressed as individuals, poor, mostly black clients are collectively addressed as ‘the community’” (Painter, Terre Blanche and Henderson, 2006:228). Most of the texts on community psychology that have been published locally in South Africa have, thankfully, not been guilty of simply repackaging a mainstream and conservative psychology in the discourse of community psychology. One of the earliest local texts published, **Community psychology: Theory, method and practice, South African and other perspectives** (Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001),

provides a critique of mainstream psychology in post-apartheid South Africa and even includes a chapter on a Marxist approach to community psychology. The examples of the South African communities discussed within the text, however, remain mainly disadvantaged black communities.

The text under review, **Community psychology: Analysis, context and action**, is a largely critically orientated text. *Section 1: Analysis* aims to contextualize community psychology as a discipline. A particularly critical chapter in this section is *Chapter 4: A history of 'community' and community psychology in South Africa* by Jeffery Yen. In this chapter Yen examines the historical uses of the term community in the discipline of psychology and within the context of apartheid. In this way the term community is seen as a political and historical construct that has implications for the way in which community psychology is conceptualized and practiced. For example, Yen points out how the term "community" has historically been used interchangeably with terms such as "race" and "ethnic groups" (re)producing ideas of communities that are inherently different to each other, rather than socially constructed. Yen highlights that although community psychology emerged alongside broader democratic movements that were aimed at "dismantling oppressive political structures of exclusion and deprivation" (p 59) not all forms of community psychology shared this particular political aim. Yen points out that while community psychology was becoming popular there were people who warned that the separate development of community psychology "allowed mainstream psychology to continue practicing in the same way, and for the same people", while community psychology became for "poor, black South African's" (p 59).

Another critically oriented chapter in *Section 1* is *Chapter 6: The mental health model: Preventing 'illness' or social inequality* by Rashid Ahmed and Shahnaaz Suffla. The key assumptions of the mental health model of community psychology are discussed alongside the central concept of prevention. The authors then take a critical turn and critically evaluate the mental health model highlighting how even a bio-psychosocial approach in mental health prevention essentially retains a disease metaphor. So while a community approach to mental health broadens its lens to include wider contextual influences on mental health, "the narrower and inappropriate metaphor of illness has not been fundamentally challenged" (p 92). Ahmed and Suffla further critique the conceptualization of risk and prevention before moving towards discussing expanding the boundaries of the mental health model and working from a critical framework. This chapter is well organized and develops a critique in a structured, engaging and critical way.

Chapters 7 and 8 (*Section 1*) introduce two critical community psychology frameworks. Chapter 7 presents an ecological approach to community psychology and highlights the different levels of influence and intervention within the context of community psychology. The author, Maretha Visser, concludes by highlighting that although wider levels of influence are acknowledged by the ecological model, "it is criticized for not being sufficiently transformative at the macro-level" (p 114). Chapter 8 introduces a critical orientation to community psychology. While an important and exciting chapter, especially in relation to the preceding chapters which provide the motivation for such a turn in community psychology, this chapter fails to adequately grapple with what a critical

approach to community psychology actually involves or “looks like”. A small section of the chapter focuses on a comparison between critical and mainstream psychology. I would suggest that the text would have benefitted from a chapter that dealt more comprehensively with the difference between mainstream psychology and a critical community psychology. It is almost as though the reader’s knowledge of what is mainstream is assumed by the authors of this chapter. I suggest that as an introduction to a critical approach the chapter remains too abstract.

Section 2: Context of Community psychology: Analysis, context and action provides chapters on interesting aspects of community psychology. One example is *Chapter 9: Intergenerational rites of passage*. This chapter discusses the importance of ritualized acts that enable a sense of belonging among specific members of a community. Clinton Van der Walt and Brett Bowman highlight the importance of community psychologists understanding these rites of passage as “socialization devices” that are “capable of reworking and/or entrenching unequal social relations” (p 146). This chapter deals with cultural practices as socially and historically constructed (as opposed to inherent processes) and therefore open to be used for “socially productive change” (p 146) by critical community psychologists. *Section 2* includes other topics, which highlight that psychological life is socially embedded (Painter, Terre Blanche & Henderson, 2006). Such chapters cover the topics of poverty, power and violence, and HIV/AIDS. An exciting chapter is *Chapter 10: Contextual issues: ‘Race’ and childhood health in South Africa*, which deals critically with the topic of “race”. Through out the chapter the term race is placed in inverted commas to highlight its socially constructed nature. The authors argue that that using “race” as the key predictor of child health runs the risk of “re-racialising and stereotyping communities”. The authors, therefore, argue for the “disaggregation” (p 174) of “race”, which involves looking at various contextual factors that drive disparities in the health care of children in South Africa rather than focusing primarily on “race”. The text also includes chapters that challenge the taken for granted assumption that communities are limited to previously disadvantaged black communities. These chapters deal with homelessness, the elderly, and former combatants in South Africa.

Section 3 of Community psychology: Analysis, context and action deals with community change and includes a number of chapters on topics that are contextually relevant and critical. They also serve to challenge the assumption that community psychology involves simply offering mainstream psychological services to poorer communities. These chapters deal with healing practices in communities, community learning and community-based coping. The section also offers important chapters on ethics and research within the discipline of community psychology. I would, however, suggest that many of the chapters in *Section 3* of the text belong in a text of its own. These chapters deal with learning in community psychology, teaching community psychology and training psychology students and interns. While these chapters are important and relevant I am not sure that they belong in a text of this nature and suggest that there is a need for a text that focuses on the teaching and learning of community psychology in a more focused and direct way.

While I would suggest that there could have been more collaboration between the authors of the different chapters to improve on the overall flow and direction of the text I think that *Community psychology: Analysis, context and action* is a critically oriented community psychology text with some creative and innovative chapters.

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