ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Linking the Levels: Network and Relational Perspectives for Community Psychology

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Abstract In this article, we assert that relationships and networks are of paramount importance for understanding and improving settings, neighborhoods, communities, and larger social systems. Despite previous acknowledgements of their relevance, relational and social network perspectives and analyses remain underrepresented in community psychological research and action. Here, we claim that network and relational perspectives can provide conceptual and empirical 'links' between levels of analysis, more fully reflecting a transactional view. We also describe some of the sophisticated methodologies that can be employed in empirical studies drawing on these perspectives. Additionally, we contend that core concepts in community psychology such as health promotion, empowerment, coalition building, and dissemination and implementation can be better understood when employing relational and network perspectives. As an introduction to this special issue of *American Journal of Community Psychology*, we draw out themes and key points from the articles in the issue, and offer recommendations for future advancement of these perspectives in the field.

Keywords Social networks · Relational perspectives · Ecological systems theory

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Introduction

Understanding relationships and networks is vital to community psychology's mission of describing individuals within settings and enacting social change to enhance wellbeing. Ecological theories identify social interactions and interpersonal relationships as key features of settings (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Neal and Neal 2013) and call attention to the relational interdependence between actors in settings (e.g., Kelly 1968; Trickett et al. 1985). Similarly, Seidman (1988) highlights the importance of exploring social regularities, or temporally stable patterns of social relations, for promoting action in community psychology noting, "It is the reciprocal relationships and interdependencies between individuals and social systems that represent a unique and emergent synthesis of community and psychology" (p. 8). Likewise, theories of power and empowerment (e.g., Christens 2012a; Neal and Neal 2011; Peterson and Zimmerman 2004) have pointed to the critical role of relationships between individuals and between organizations in the distribution of resources and efforts to build collective action.

Embracing these assertions of the importance of relationships, the papers in this special issue adopt relational (see Carpendale and Racine 2011; Cummins et al. 2007; Emirbayer 1997; Gergen 2009; Gillespie and Cornish 2010) and social network (see Borgatti et al. 2009; Christakis and Fowler 2007; Milward and Provan 1998; Newman et al. 2006) perspectives to address key theoretical and substantive topics in community psychology. Here, we argue that relational and social network perspectives can advance the field of community psychology in three ways. First, relational perspectives and network perspectives demonstrate how relationships serve as links between levels of analysis, thus aiding community

psychologists in exploring transactions between individuals, the settings that they inhabit, and larger social systems. Second, relational and social network perspectives offer sophisticated methods for understanding contexts and settings. Third, relational and social network perspectives can enrich theory and research on core areas interest to community psychology.

Relationships as Links Between Levels of Analysis

The ecological metaphor—that social settings can be understood in ways analogous to plant and animal ecosystems (Park 1936)—has been among the strongest conceptual influences on community psychological theory and research (Trickett 1984). Ecological systems theory describes the human ecology as a set of nested systems (i.e., microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems) radiating out from an individual person (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In Bronfenbrenner's formulation, focused on child development, a child is nested within microsystems like the family and school, which in turn are nested within mesosystemic social interactions between individuals across different microsystems. The microsystem and mesosystem are themselves encompassed in exosystem settings that influence the child but in which he or she does not play a role (e.g., school district) and by the macrosystem, which includes policies as well as societal norms and beliefs. More recently, the influence of the ecological metaphor and ecological theories on community psychology theory and research has increased due to the development of methods that can account for shared variance at a group level (multi-level modeling) or can display and analyze data at different levels of aggregation (geographic information systems) (Luke 2005).

These analytic techniques have likely contributed to the prominence of the concept of "levels" of analysis in community psychology as well as in related fields, such as public health, criminology, sociology, and political science. For instance, community psychological models for empowerment have been specified at the psychological level, the organizational level, and the community level (Zimmerman 2000). Similarly, sense of community has been theorized and measured as an individual-level construct, but with reference to other levels of analysis, such as workplaces, neighborhoods, and community organizations (Peterson et al. 2008). Despite the influence of ecological theories, many have observed that the field of community psychology has remained primarily focused on individual-level analyses and interventions (e.g., Sarason 1984; Luke 2005). These observations have been accompanied by calls for more research that goes beyond the individual or psychological level (e.g., Shinn and Rapkin 2000). Even when community psychologists study extra-individual levels of

analysis, however, we primarily do so by aggregating individual characteristics or perceptions within organizations, neighborhoods, or communities (e.g., Hughey et al. 2008). As Shinn (1990) argues, aggregating individual level data to study organizational or community level phenomena may represent a poor fit between conceptualization and measurement.

Currently, advances in research design and methodology are permitting greater specificity in multi-level studies in the field of community psychology. Relational and network perspectives offer one way for community psychologists to move beyond an individual level of analysis and the use of aggregated individual level data to assess organizational, neighborhood, and community level phenomena in more holistic ways (Altman and Rogoff 1987; Newbrough 1973). Relationships or social interactions are posited to be the building blocks of larger social settings (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1979; Neal and Neal 2013) and can help explain macro-level phenomena (e.g., Coleman 1988; Granovetter 1973). Thus, a relational or network perspective that focuses on the relationships between people and/or organizations can escape the individual level trap (Sarason 1981), permitting community psychologists to advance theory and research that more effectively links multiple levels of analysis (e.g., individual, organizational, community) or ecological systems.

To illustrate, Neal and Neal (2013) recently proposed a reformulation of the traditional nested view to a network view of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems. They conceptualize settings as "a set of people engaged in social interaction" and redefine each of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems in terms of relationships between individuals (p. 724). Here, ecological systems are not viewed as nested, but instead as overlapping and linked by relationships. Thus, in Neal and Neal's (2013) reformulation, ecological systems are not defined a priori but instead are identified by studying the pattern of relationships that surround individuals. This view of human ecology shifts the focus of study from discrete ecological systems or levels of analysis to an emphasis on overlapping settings that are linked by relationships. Social network and relational perspectives provide powerful ways to study these linking relationships.

Methods for Understanding Context

Network analysis and other relational methods assess context by exploring the pattern of relationships between actors in a setting and identifying key elements of social interactions in communities (Wellman 1988). The papers in this special issue highlight how network analysis and other methods that focus on measuring and understanding social

interactions can advance our understanding of individuals, settings, and communities.

Methodological Advances from a Social Network Perspective

Some of the earliest proponents of network analysis were psychologists interested in the study of communities (e.g., Festinger et al. 1950; Moreno 1941). The actors in network analysis are often individual people, but can also represent aggregate units such as organizations, communities, cities, or even countries. Network analysis can be used to characterize patterns of relationships at the level of the actor, dyad, or whole network. First, measures at the level of the *dyad* (e.g., selection/influence) provide information about connections or similarities between actors in the network. Second, measures at the level of the *actor* (e.g., centrality, power) provide information about how particular actors are positioned within a network structure. Third, measures at the level of the *whole network* (e.g., density, reciprocity, distributions of centrality and power) provide information about the entire structure of actors' relationships in a particular setting (e.g., a classroom of children, a coalition of organizations). Across this special issue, papers use a variety of dyadic, actor, and whole network measures. Moreover, these papers employ cutting edge methods that track networks over time and across space, propose setting level measures, and illustrate how network analysis can be used in combination with qualitative methods.

Networks Over Time

Relationships are dynamic, prompting the development of sophisticated longitudinal models to explore how relationships form and how they influence behavior over time (e.g., Snijders et al. 2010; Veenstra et al. 2013). Understanding relational dynamics is critical to common goals in community psychology such as developing cohesive communities and creating contextually appropriate interventions that lead to positive behavior change. In this issue, Jason et al. (2014) apply stochastic actor-based modeling to understand the formation of trust and confidant relationships among residents in substance use recovery homes across a 3-month period. Stochastic actor-based models are particularly powerful for exploring relationship formation in communities because they allow for the testing of predictors of relationship formation (e.g., time in residence) while simultaneously controlling for endogenous tendencies toward relationship formation (e.g., reciprocity, transitivity). Similarly, Long et al. (2014) use longitudinal social network analysis to examine the influence of friends' recycling and littering behavior on high school students' own behaviors within the context of a school-based recycling intervention. Specifically, they test how average friends' behavior in the ninth week of school predicted change in individuals' behavior in the twenty-eighth week of school using methods that adjusted model standard errors for statistical non-independence. Influence models of this type can be particularly important for understanding typical diffusion processes within community-based interventions, thus informing dissemination and implementation research.

Networks Across Space

Relationships occur across physical space, prompting researchers to combine network and spatial methods. In this issue, Boessen et al. (2014) examine associations between the spatial dispersion of four types of egocentric networks (i.e., kin, friendship, neighborhood safety contacts, discuss important matters) and individuals' perceived cohesion in their neighborhood and city. They find that perceived neighborhood and city cohesion were lower for individuals who had more distant ties to kin and neighborhood safety contacts. Additional studies in this issue combine relational or network measures with analyses conducted using geographic information systems (GIS). At the individual level, Shin (2014) uses GIS to map the physical location of Korean elders' residences in relation to their family, friends, and local ethnic businesses in the Chicago metropolitan area. These maps reveal that Korean elders in Chicago typically lived far away from family members but close by to friends. Likewise, visiting frequency of friends is much higher than families, suggesting that Korean elders relied on a network of friends for emotional and social support. At the organizational level, Cardazone et al. (2014) use network analysis and GIS to assess opportunities for strengthening a community coalition to increase public awareness of child maltreatment in Hawaii. Using geocoded survey response data and organizational data, they map the location of organizations involved in the coalition (coding them for their level of centrality) along with public awareness of child maltreatment. This allows them to pinpoint geographic areas that could benefit from targeted efforts for increased engagement in the coalition. Overall, each of these studies demonstrates the power of simultaneously considering relational and spatial features in community-based work.

Setting Level Measurement

Network analysis also provides new avenues for setting level measurement. In this issue, Neal (2014a) extends work by Neal and Neal (2011), proposing new network measures of empowering setting that assess whether the distribution of existing relationships across actors provide

members with roughly equal "power over" resources. These measures provide concrete setting-level diagnostics of empowerment that can be compared across contexts (e.g., histograms, Gini coefficients). Moreover, they can be used to delineate points of intervention where relationships can be created to turn disempowering settings into empowering ones. Also in this issue, Neal (2014b) proposes a new network measure, γ-centrality, that can be used flexibly to assess three different types of processes indicative of empowered organizations: building alliances, getting the word out, and capturing others' attention. Specifically, depending on how the parameter γ is set, this measure can be used to indicate how an organization's position within a network of information exchange facilitates each of these processes. As a set, these papers illuminate the power of network analysis for moving beyond analyses solely at the individual level to consider how relationships *within* (Neal 2014a) and *between* (Neal 2014b) settings influence setting and individual level outcomes.

Mixed Method Approaches

Network analysis can be combined with qualitative approaches to yield rich mixed methods data. For example, to examine children's experiences of relational empowerment within the context of a youth participatory action research program, Langhout et al. (2014) combine two-mode network data on children and the settings in which they participated with qualitative data drawn from children's interviews and self-defined goals. Two-mode network data augment qualitative data on children's experiences of relational empowerment by providing insight into the amount of bridging between settings by common individuals as well as insight into who served as helpers and challenged children to reach school goals within settings. Evans et al. (2014) combine network analysis and qualitative interview data to explore the formation of an organizational coalition designed to combat poverty in Miami. Here, network data serve a practical purpose, providing information about the structure of interorganizational relationships in the early stages of the coalition as well as the lead organization's network position in the coalition. Qualitative data provide additional details about factors that facilitated and hindered coalition development. Finally, Long et al. (2014) enrich their longitudinal network analysis of friend influence on recycling and littering behavior with focus group data from students on their perceptions of how social interactions shape these behaviors. These studies illustrate how network analysis and qualitative methods can go hand in hand to inform community-based work.

Methodological Advances from a Relational Perspective

Studies that involve other relational perspectives also hold promise for promoting an understanding of context in community psychology and related disciplines and fields. In contrast to network analysis, studies that involve other relational perspectives do not formally enumerate relationships between actors. Instead, these studies focus on the identification of key elements of social interactions in communities using quantitative (e.g., survey instrument development) and/or qualitative (e.g., case studies) approaches.

Survey Instrument Development

Quantitative studies on the key elements of social interactions in communities have often focused on survey instrument development. In this issue, Cheryomukhin and Peterson (2014) use exploratory factor analysis and path analysis to validate the Brief Azerbaijani Empowerment Scale (BAES) in a sample of adults living in Azerbaijan. This measurement development work adds a much-needed focus on measurement development for relational elements of psychological empowerment, thus attending to recent theoretical work in this area (Christens 2012b). Moreover, it focuses on developing culturally appropriate measurement of psychological empowerment for an understudied population (i.e., citizens of a former Soviet country).

Case Studies and Examples

Qualitative studies on the key elements of social interactions in communities have often employed case studies or case examples. In this issue, Alia et al. (2014) conduct ethnographic observations of a community health center-based farmers market in a rural, predominantly low-income county in South Carolina with the goal of delineating the forms of social interactions that the market encouraged. These rich observational data highlight the interpersonal benefits of the farmer's market, which served as a venue where residents and farmers engaged in a variety of social interactions including camaraderie, economic exchanges, educational exchanges, resource sharing and conflict resolution. Christens et al. (2014) use substantive theorizing to highlight relational elements of empowerment in WISDOM, a statewide federation promoting community organizing initiatives in Wisconsin. Through this case example, they highlight how relational activities in WISDOM such as one-to-one meetings, collective reflection, and social analysis lead to the bridging of interpersonal ties across ecological systems. Employing a first persons-account, Smith et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of

incorporating relational components like trust and mutual familiarity in the dissemination and implementation of a community-based after school program for youth. Finally, Tebes et al. (2014) employ case examples from two interdisciplinary team science projects to illustrate the potential role of community psychology principles in the unique relational context of interdisciplinary research teams. As a set, these papers highlight the utility of case studies and examples for understanding critical relational components in a number of substantive areas (e.g., sense of community, empowerment, dissemination and implementation, transdisciplinary action research).

Theory and Research in Community Psychology

Just as network analysis and other relational methods offer the potential to enhance our field's methodological sophistication, relational and social network perspectives can open up new avenues for theory and research design. Accordingly, the articles that comprise this special issue make use of social network and relational theory, as well as methods. In doing so, they make substantive contributions to several topics of central interest to community psychology. In this section, we describe these contributions according to the following themes: (1) mutual help and health promotion, (2) community capacity and coalitions, (3) power and empowerment, (4) relational processes and physical space, (5) dissemination and implementation, and (6) transdisciplinary action research.

Mutual Help and Health Promotion

As a departure from professionally-driven solutions to social problems, community psychologists have long recognized and sought to understand how community members engage in numerous forms of mutual assistance that can promote individual and broader community wellbeing (Levine 1988; Roberts et al. 1999). Articles in this special issue provide network-based insights into the ways that mutual aid and community-driven health promotion can unfold across various community settings. For instance, the article by Jason et al. (2014) identifies relational dynamics and mechanisms that develop in residential mutual help environments for those recovering from substance use disorders (i.e., recovery houses). These relational dynamics build toward the sobriety-focused social support that has been identified as critical to sustained recovery. Confidant relationships—those in which participants can share and discuss feelings such as stress and loneliness—are built on trust. In turn, trust is predicted by member participation in activities supportive of the houses' shared goal of recovery. Trust does not necessarily develop reciprocally in these

settings, and it may have cascading effects in which trust that is developed toward one other resident makes one more likely to trust others in the house. There are numerous implications for praxis and directions for future research that emerge from these findings. For example, the findings suggest that for trust to develop, recovery settings should feature a mix of newer residents/members and veteran residents/members.

Community-level and systems interventions involve the creation of new settings that can facilitate specific forms of social interactions that contribute to wellness and community development (Hawe et al. 2009). The article in this special issue by Alia et al. (2014) draws on systematic observations of a local farmers' market located in a federally qualified health center in a low-income, rural community. The findings are noteworthy for understanding the various mechanisms through which varieties of types of actors (e.g., farmers, researchers, customers, market staff) engage in forms of social interaction (e.g., communication, resource and information exchanges, resource sharing, community ownership, and conflict resolution) in ways that ultimately lead to the promotion of community health and wellbeing. The findings from this study also emphasize the roles of non-human "actors" that influence social network formation and functioning, including money, food, and weather.

Community Capacity and Coalitions

Community psychologists often work with organizational and community partners who are trying to build capacity and make progress on complex and overlapping social problems. Work with multi-sector coalitions is increasingly common in this realm. Accordingly, theory and research on coalition functioning has become more prominent, and some of this work has taken relational and network approaches (e.g., Bess et al. 2011; Nowell 2009). In this issue, the contribution by Cardazone et al. (2014) provides insights from a statewide coalition to prevent child abuse and neglect in Hawaii. Their study highlights the different roles that organizations can play based on their network position. For example, organizations with high levels of centrality can disseminate information quickly or coordinate communication among other organizations in the coalition. Moreover, findings point to some potential drawbacks of organizational network centrality and density, including the likelihood of fewer links to organizations outside of the coalition. Finally, this article also emphasizes the utility of organizational network properties, diagrams and maps for intervention, outreach, and other forms of action within the coalition, suggesting opportunities and models for action research.

In their contribution to this issue, Evans et al. (2014) provide a case study of the formative stage of an anti-poverty coalition in Miami. Their study highlights the important role of a particular "lead" organization to galvanize, guide, and coordinate the inter-organizational relationships and activities to more effectively and efficiently change systems. This praxis-oriented article highlights the practical utility of network analysis (in conjunction with other methods) as a tool for action research partnerships with community organizations. Several other studies in the issue that have implications for coalition work (e.g., Christens et al. 2014; Neal 2014b) are discussed in more detail below as they relate to power and empowerment.

Power and Empowerment

The articles in this special issue make a number of new contributions to the literature on power and empowerment. Langhout et al. (2014) add to the growing body of community psychological research on empowerment among young people with a study that takes place in the context of a youth participatory action research (yPAR) project among elementary school students. Their article additionally advances the empowerment literature by empirically examining the theorized dimensions of a relational component of psychological empowerment (Christens 2012b). Empowerment is likely a context-specific process and construct (Zimmerman 1995). Examining and assessing empowerment in a diversity of contexts, cultures, and populations is therefore an important goal for advancing understanding of empowerment processes. Cheryomukhin and Peterson (2014) assess psychological empowerment among participants in Azerbaijan, a predominately Muslim post-Soviet country. Their study provides important insights for empowerment theory and practice outside the West, where relatively few studies of empowerment have been conducted to date. In addition to validating a measure of the intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment for an additional cultural and sociopolitical context, their article also lays some groundwork for development of measures for relational empowerment.

Empowerment has been theorized from an ecological perspective, which emphasizes the importance of understanding dynamics in settings over time (Rappaport 1987). In her contribution, Neal (2014a) builds on previous work on power as a structural phenomenon (Neal and Neal 2011) and demonstrates the potential insights to be gained from mapping distributions of network power within settings to understand the degree to which different settings are likely conducive to empowerment processes and outcomes. As well as providing new insights for measurement of empowering settings, this article suggests new directions for targeted interventions that may produce more egalitarian and empowering settings.

Empowerment can also be considered as a set of processes and outcomes within and between organizations. In his contribution to the issue, Neal (2014b) applies a novel network-based measure (γ-centrality) to illuminate processes of informational exchange in organizational empowerment, advancing existing conceptual and empirical work on this topic (e.g., Peterson and Hughey 2002; Peterson and Zimmerman 2004). Specifically, he explores the organization-level informational network processes that underlie the interorganizational component of organizational empowerment, which include building alliances, getting the word out, and capturing others' attention. The proposed measure and the conceptual discussion with an empirical example offer theoretical insights, methodological tools, and potential for advancing practice within and between organizations through a more nuanced understanding of organizational empowerment.

A major goal of empowerment theory is to understand the ways that those with fewer societal advantages can collectively alter systems for the benefit of their communities. Grassroots community organizing therefore represents a set of societal phenomena that is a particularly fertile ground for the study of empowerment processes. In their contribution to this issue, Christens et al. (2014) identify social regularities in community organizing initiatives that channel power across ecological systems (i.e., micro-, meso-, exo-, macro). The social regularities that they identify—listening, reflection, and social analysis—operate across each of these ecological systems to promote empowerment and develop social power. Using a case example of a statewide network of organizing initiatives in Wisconsin to examine these social regularities in action, this article combines community psychological theory with substantive theorizing and practice-based insights to provide recommendations for ongoing empirical research on empowerment using relational and social network perspectives.

Relational Processes and Physical Space

The articles in this issue make contributions to the literature on additional relational processes of interest to community psychology, including social support, collective efficacy, cohesion, and neighborhood attachment. They also build on the tradition of transdisciplinary scholarship in community psychology that considers the relationship of the built/spatial environment with social, economic, and political phenomena (see Christens and Perkins 2008). For instance, an article by Shin (2014) examines independence and collective efficacy among a specific population in metropolitan Chicago—immigrant Korean elders. Her study provides insights into the role of cultural brokers

acting as bridges between Korean elders and the larger physical and cultural environments in which they reside. This multi-method study provides important implications not only for promoting successful outcomes for elderly immigrants, but for the broader fields of urban planning, gerontology, affordable housing, family programs and policies.

The article in this issue by Boessen et al. (2014) examines how different types of ties (e.g., kin, social, safety) and their spatial distribution influence perceptions of neighborhood and city cohesion, finding that it is not the aggregate number of ties that matter most for predicting neighborhood attachment, but the types (specifically discussion and safety ties) and spatial distributions (fewer ties in other parts of the city was associated with higher levels neighborhood cohesion) of these ties. These findings demonstrate the importance of considering the ways that geographic space shapes relationships, and the ways that these affect resident's sense of belonging, sense of community, and attachments to their neighborhoods and cities.

Dissemination and Implementation

In our field's efforts to enhance and sustain community capacity and wellbeing, one set of persistent challenges involves implementation of new practices, programs, and policies. Several of the articles in this issue address issues related to dissemination and implementation of interventions and evidence-based practices and programs. Specifically, they highlight the potential of social network and relational perspectives for understanding and advancing dissemination and implementation efforts. For example, Long et al. (2014) highlight the roles that peer influence played in changing recycling and littering behaviors over time among a sample of high school students. Their study suggests the importance of carefully considering the influence of friends, leaders, family members, and others—such as teachers—when seeking to influence behaviors within particular settings. Just as social networks can account for within-settings processes, they are important to consider across settings. Smith et al. (2014) demonstrate the utility of a relational perspective on the roles and relationships between administrators, staff, youth, families, and researchers in the dissemination and implementation of an afterschool program that has been shown to prevent substance abuse and problem behaviors. Developing trust and rapport among key actors was seen as key achievements leading to successful implementation.

Transdisciplinary Action Research

Relational and network perspectives can also inform and illuminate the ways that research is designed and conducted (e.g., Neal et al. 2013). Social research is often conducted in teams, and these teams increasingly contain not only representatives of different academic disciplines, but also community stakeholders. Taking a relational perspective, Tebes et al. (2014) situate knowledge production and expertise in the transactional spaces between professional researchers in different disciplines and society. They issue a call to those who evaluate, document, and fund research to embrace this complexity in their practices, and to break down perceived boundaries between disciplines, science and practice, and communities and universities. Indeed, many of the studies in this issue exemplify the engaged and multi-disciplinary approach to knowledge production that Tebes and colleagues describe (e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Langhout et al. 2014).

Conclusions

Although there is a strong commitment to the understanding of context in the field of community psychology (e.g., Shinn and Rapkin 2000; Trickett 1996, 2009), much of the research in our field remains at the individual level of analysis (Espino and Trickett 2008; Luke 2005; Martin et al. 2004). The social network and relational perspectives highlighted in this special issue offer promise for studying organizational, neighborhood, and community phenomena. Moreover, because relationships or social interactions link different levels of analysis (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1979; Neal and Neal 2013), these perspectives offer particular advantages in advancing theory and research on transactions between individuals, settings, and larger social systems. For example, several of the papers in this special issue highlighted how exploring individual relationships could provide a more holistic understanding of a setting (e.g., Alia et al. 2014; Jason et al. 2014; Langhout et al. 2014; Neal 2014a). Other papers in this issue highlighted how exploring organizational relationships could advance theory and research on larger social systems like coalitions (e.g., Cardazone et al. 2014; Evans et al. 2014; Neal 2014b). Finally, Christens et al. (2014) highlight how relationships operate across multiple ecological systems (i.e., micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems) to channel power in community organizing.

In addition to offering ways of linking levels of analysis in theory and empirical inquiry, relational and social network perspectives also present promising ways to advance both methodological and substantive approaches in community psychology. Methodologically, the papers in this special issue provide new avenues for the measurement of relationships and social networks (e.g., Cheryomukhin and Peterson 2014; Neal 2014a, b), offer exciting directions for examining relationships across time (e.g., Jason et al. 2014;

Long et al. 2014) and space (e.g., Boessen et al. 2014; Shin 2014), and illustrate how quantitative and qualitative data can be blended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of relationships (e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Langhout et al. 2014). Substantively, the papers in this special issue demonstrate how relational and social network perspectives can be flexibly applied to a broad set of phenomena of interest to community psychologists, ranging from individual relational processes such as social support and sense of community (e.g., Boessen et al. 2014; Shin 2014) to community capacity and coalitions (e.g., Cardazone et al. 2014; Evans et al. 2014). These perspectives also have implications for how community psychologists engage in research and interventions, including dissemination efforts (e.g., Smith et al. 2014) and transdisciplinary action research (e.g., Tebes et al. 2014). It is our hope that the papers in this special issue will inspire widespread use of social network analysis and other relational methods.

The work represented here is just the tip of the iceberg, and suggests several avenues for future directions. Methodologically, there is a need for more longitudinal work that captures relational dynamics over time and work that integrates relational perspectives with other methods that are designed to explore context (e.g., GIS, agent-based models, qualitative inquiry). Substantively, relational and social network perspectives can continue to enhance research on a multitude of community-level phenomena. Within community psychology, these perspectives have commonly been applied to assess empowerment and power (e.g., Christens 2012b; Neal and Neal 2011), social support (e.g., Hirsch 1980), and community capacity (e.g., Nowell 2009). However, work in this issue and in other fields suggests the benefits of these approaches for research on dissemination and implementation (e.g., Dearing 2008; Rogers 1995; Smith et al. 2014), mutual help (Jason et al. 2014) and transdisciplinary research (e.g., Neal et al. 2013; Tebes et al. 2014). As community psychologists adopt relational and social network perspectives, it will be important to learn from sociology, anthropology, public health, and other fields that have histories of using these approaches (Freeman 2004). The thorough incorporation of relational and social network perspectives and methods into the field will be a challenge, requiring us to bridge disciplines, rework theories, and learn new methodologies. We hope that you will agree with us that the articles in this special issue make clear the benefits of rising to this challenge.

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