Community Building: Our Next Frontier

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Today's society is faced with numerous, escalating problems like homelessness, drug addictions, and violence, and some of these problems may be related to a declining sense of community. In this article, we trace some of the historical reasons that account for why many individuals no longer have a strong sense of community. Example are provided of the development of communities that provide members with a sense of connectedness and cohesion. We believe that community building represents a promising direction for the field of community psychology.

KEY WORDS: Sense of community; community building; community psychology; Oxford Houses; disenfranchised populations.

Community psychologists have contributed to the awareness and the development of knowledge about social processes, evaluations, of the methods and techniques that define a variety of preventive interventions, and more recently have attempted to document contextual factors that influence the maintenance of preventive interventions (Kelly, 1990). In their review of social and community interventions, Levine, Toro, and Perkins (1993) note that taking advantage of new approaches to social problems such as utilizing an ecological orientation, mutual help orientation, and consumer involvement in the treatment process will require additional investment of public resources that can only be made through the public system. Despite recent changes in the political leadership of our nation, community-based interventions have yet to be made a priority, and increases in public funding for prevention and remediation of existing problems remain uncertain.

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Our society is faced with numerous, seemingly insurmountable problems, including homelessness, AIDS, gang activity and domestic violence (Crawford et al. 1990; Thompson & Jason, 1988). Many people face battles related to alcoholism and other substance abuse; physical and mental illnesses; and numerous disabling conditions (Glenwick & Jason, 1993). Seemingly "safe" and "healthy" communities are feeling the force of these problems. With increasing incidence, many have experienced a personal invasion of property of person while others face the toll of illness and disability (Jason, 1993). Individuals may try to ignore such encroachment in their lives, but the disintegrating social structure entangles even sheltered or isolated citizens. Communities try to mobilize and fight these problems, but individuals seem less connected and lack direction or certainty about how to proceed. Clearly, our society is at crossroads and community psychologists have the opportunity, if not the mission, to move beyond traditional models of social science research toward developing broader frameworks for understanding our communities; establishing increasing collaborative relationships with citizens and members of other disciplines; and tackling the problems now faced by society (Tolan, Keys, Chertok, & Jason, 1990).

We are well aware of the need to affect change, build on communities' strengths, and stem the waste created by our society's problems (Caplan, 1964). Regardless of strides in knowledge and understanding, while we try to translate insights into better social conditions, some believe that the very fabric of our society is ripping. Fox (1993) suggests that we might need to refocus our attention from the law, as the reservoir of our solutions to human problems, and begin to identify our values in new sources, such as psychological theory and personal ethics. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985) suggest that for many individuals the meaning of life has been tied to acquiring increasing income and status, yet few are satisfied with this utter self absorption. These symbols and goals might be part of the problem of society today. Faced with the enormity of our problems, we must look critically at current approaches but go further, and reevaluate the frameworks and values that drive these approaches.

Integral to understanding connectedness or community is the concept of psychological sense of community (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). Sarason (1974) originally defined the concept to mean a supportive network, a dependable and stable structure that one can depend on for psychological significance and identification. Sarason further stated that the psychological sense of community should be the overarching goal of all community interventions and developing this sense is one of life's major tasks. Dunham (1986) suggested that this concept should not be limited to the notion of place, but rather it is better conceived as a process than a fixed geographic

location. Bishop, Chertok, and Jason (1994) recently factor analyzed a sense of community scale and found two factors: mission and connection-reciprocal responsibility. Mission refers to the values and goals that transcend individual participants. Connection leads to the perception that one is accepted by members of an ongoing group, while reciprocal responsibility connotes members being seen as valuable resources to a setting, and the setting responding to the needs of the individuals. The importance of the connection to one's family and community have been repeatedly demonstrated. For example, in studies of life satisfaction, the four most important variables are one's family, one's house, one's community, and one's neighborhood (Lyon, 1989). In part, the attractiveness of mutual support groups, block associations, intentional communities (Kanter, 1972), and voluntary associations are their attempts to create a sense of purpose and community for their members.

In this essay, we suggest that a loss of connectedness or community has contributed to the strain within society, and that integrating a historical perspective into our analysis of community problems might be essential to developing interventions. A historical perspective takes into account changes that have put society at risk for its current problems, and provides a way to explore and eventually address these problem at a deeper level. Building on this assumption, we explore real world models of community that effectively deal with some of today's devastating problems. Finally, the role of community psychologists will be discussed and recommendations for future directions suggested.

LOSS OF COMMUNITY: A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

The problems faced by society might seem amendable to change by identifying the particular behaviors or reinforcement that are associated with the problems and then engineering effective interventions. Though such an approach might result in change, danger remains with the deeper, underlying roots of the problem going unaddressed (Bogat & Jason, in press). If indeed loss of community or connectedness is an underlying root to many modern problems (Sarason, 1974), then appreciating and understanding its development might well contribute in the analysis of more specific problems and better yet their resolution.

According to Morgan (1942), throughout history, people lived in communal dwellings. It was within the village that people helped each other, not out of charity but because it was the natural way of life. At times, village life was burdened with narrowness and provincialism; however, the positive features of mutual respect, working together for common ends,

neighborliness were strong features that provided nurturance and meaning. He suggests that these communities' qualities included natural, spontaneous, organic relations between people growing from mutual affection, customs, and traditions. In comparison, after the onset of the Industrial Revolution, our modern societies began to feature formal organizations, contracts, and legislature. Our present modern societies have greater individual freedom, but the cost has been a decline in human connectedness, community spirit, and neighborliness (McLaughlin & Davidson, 1986).²

Over the last 150 years, some sociologists and anthropologists have noticed a change in values within our culture. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, people had specified roles in crafts and farming, and these jobs provided meaning to their lives. As more and more people moved from the village to the cities, the long-term bonds with the land were severed, and some family and community traditions began to weaken. Stein (1960) has traced the effects of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization on the transformation of America and in reviewing others' work he concluded that industrialization replaced a sense of coherence and a satisfaction with one's craft with a new emphasis on getting ahead as the central value.

The Industrial Revolution marks a major shift in the experience of community for many people, but other forces might have also contributed to the reduction in our sense of community. When societal and community norms, including culture, rituals, and customs, began to decline, some people began losing their sense of coherence and interest in participating in the larger community. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985) suggest that changing values and beliefs, as well as a loss of connectedness corresponded with an increasing focus on the individual. In the 1940s and 50s, there was a new dedication to an ever-rising standard of living, which justified the industrial work role. In this new society, according to Stein (1960), high levels of alienation and isolation occurred, and the local community ceased to be a place that mattered. Life transitions were minimized or performed perfunctorily by impersonal social agencies, schools, or churches.

Of course, many people in urban settings have been able to integrate old and new traditions, and to develop a sense of community. Many individuals in industrial societies do continue to hold traditions, values, and myths which effectively guided their predecessors. However, to the extent that many individuals, in our mobile, industrial society lack a community of reference, and some of the rich ties to their past belief systems and

²Some scholars believe that this assessment is overly pessimistic (Lyon, 1989).

customs have been weakened, then community intervenors might need to take these factors into account when designing their interventions.

Spretnak (1991) offers a provocative set of propositions concerning vulnerabilities that occurred even further back than the Industrial Revolution.³ She believes that many maladies of our modern world are in fact consequences of our tendency to control and dominate the forces of nature rather than living in a respectful balance with her. For Spretnak (1991), a breakdown in the sense of community was inevitable once the larger forces of nature were considered engulfing and devouring and the ideal became self-preservation and control. Excessive pollution, overpopulation, and despoiling of the land are threatening our survival. Finding a balance with the forces of nature might be central for the survival of our species, as well as providing people with the resources to nurture their communities and develop a sense of community.

Vulnerabilities in our sense of community might have also been indirectly affected by the Scientific Revolution, which has provided us a valuable way to understand and to improve the natural world. Although we can appreciate the enormous changes in our world that science has made possible, including among others the sophisticated treatment of diseases and more efficient agricultural methods, the passion to perceive and understand nature might have contributed to a crisis of the belief systems and values of some people. As science prospered, some began to believe that intellectual prowess and achievement were the only symbols of success (Bartel & Guskin, 1971), and others including many existentialists (Sartre, 1956), proposed that religions and myths that had once guided people through their lives were antiquated and no longer relevant. Campbell (1949) maintains that many of our modern day problems are due to the lack of nurturing and validating rituals and images, which once provided people's lives with meaning. To the extent that the mystery and vitality of some people's symbols, images, and myths have eroded, it is possible that this breakdown in a culturally transmitted sense of coherence and meaning might have also contributed to a reduction in our sense of community.

Ruth Benedict, Paul Radin, Meyer Fortes, and E. R. Leach explored cultures where everyday life was imaginatively transformed and saturated with meaning (Stein, 1960). In these cultures, life transformation were honored and people's lives had a balance with nature. Certainly, many people have continued to have vital and energizing symbols and images by which to guide their lives. There are many who have found balance between modern civilized life and nature, and maintained rituals and customs to help

³Spretnack (1991) endorses an ecological postmodern philosophical model, which is strikingly different from a deconstructive postmodern model.

make sense of life. It is to these people that we might look for clues to strengthening our connectedness to each other and the world in a large sense. In the next section communities existing, sometimes against great odds, will be described. These communities may not have surmounted all the problems of modern society, but they are working for their members in deep, meaningful ways.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

A thesis of this article is that there are many individuals who no longer have a strong community or family to provide them support.⁴ Thousands of individuals are homeless, and others released from state hospitals and detoxification settings have no place to go. Still others live alone and isolated with chronic illnesses or disabilities. It is also possible that some of our preventive interventions with high-risk children are compromised or thwarted by the ecosystems in which they live, and the children's vulnerabilities might be directly related to their environment and its inadequate sense of community. For these tragic situations, we as community psychologists might have something unique to offer. We believe that the psychological sense of community can be an energizing force in attempting solutions to some of these problems. We have many roles to play including: establishing supportive settings, collaborating with and advocating for the creation of these types of settings, and helping to evaluate these settings.

The following examples of individuals and groups forming alternative settings or communities demonstrate different approaches to individual and community level problems. In these structured cohesive units, members seem to have a common mission, connection, and reciprocal responsibility. These communities were established through the efforts of professionals, ordinary citizens, or members of disenfranchised groups.

The Lodge

George Fairweather pursued the role of social problem-solving scientist, acting as a research advocate and lobbyist for people with chronic mental illness. Fairweather noted that many patients with mental illness

⁴In this essay we argued that the lack of a psychological sense of community might put some individuals at risk for some of the maladies of present day life. Not all agree that we are presently confronted with a breakdown in sense of community. Lyon (1989), for example, suggests that there is little evidence to support the claim of individual alienation, and that much of the shared affection, customs and traditions remain in our communities today.

were stable but had little motivation and great institutional dependency. Adaptive behaviors in the hospital did not generalize well to the community and a high rate recidivism among formerly hospitalized patients was documented (Fairweather 1964, 1967). Based on these observations and experiences with hospitalized individuals, Fairweather suggested the radical notion that people with mental illness could benefit from approaches other than traditional hospitalization and live relatively normal lives in the mainstream of society. Toward this end a model for community reintegration emerged, the Lodge.

The Lodge was to be a self-governing organization thereby allowing members a more participative role in management and decision making (Fairweather, 1979). To optimize the chances for success, The Lodge was located in a neighborhood (blue collar, racially mixed) seen as less likely to resist its existence. Also as part of the program, members owned and operated their own business allowing for opportunities for productive work roles. The program was not designed to be transitional, but to function as a surrogate family (Tornatzky & Fergus, 1982).

Important findings of evaluation over five years included the following: Mutual acceptance and respect of neighbors and Lodge members increased over time; Lodge members compared to the control group spent significantly greater time in the community and employed; and the cost of the Lodge was one-third that of traditional community mental health programs. Fairweather's well documented experiences provide both precious information in developing new models as well as an inspiring example of a social scientist committed to the belief that we can participate in the creation of new support systems that enhance the psychological sense of community.

H.O.M.E.

In addition to community psychologists, social workers have long advocated that problems (e.g., social isolation, insufficient social support) might be best addressed through the creation or strengthening of communities. For example, in the late 1800's Jane Addams established Hull-House in Chicago in an effort to fight problems faced by poor immigrants struggling to make a new life. Michael and Lilo Salmon provide a current example of this type of commitment and action. They found HOME (Housing Opportunities and Maintenance for the Elderly), an organization which is committed to creating living situations that are supportive and family-like in atmosphere for low income elderly in Chicago. The philosophy of HOME is to treat elderly with respect: to preserve their dignity and independence and to consider them as friends rather than "clients." Lilo, a

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social worker, believed that the housing problems of the elderly could be better addressed by creating intergenerational communities. Toward this end intergenerational homes were established, not as agency programs administered by professionals but as communities where the "staff" are also residents or members. In each home live 12-14 elderly individuals, a full-time coordinator and his/her family, and several college students who receive room and board in exchange for completing chores. These intergenerational homes offer elderly "an alternative to high rents, loneliness, isolation and the burden of day-to-day self care" and "...an innovative communal possibility for a new and different lifestyle and foster companionship and friendship by offering the residents the opportunity for caring for each other." (HOME Brochure, 1991, p. 8)

l'Arche

Ordinary citizens have also taken extraordinary steps toward developing communities that offer companionship, friendship, and support in baring the burden of day-to-day living. Jean Vanier, a philosopher, found the l'Arche community in 1964 where people with mental retardation and "normal" intelligence live together. Vanier had no formal knowledge of mental retardation, thereby his approach to people with mental retardation was not effected by the role expectations that human service professionals might bring to such a project. His intention was to create a community built on trust and interdependence; the underlying mission of l'Arche is the creation of a nurturing environment for people with mental retardation (Dunne, 1986). Vanier believed that the barriers that prevented people from making contact had to be tackled in the life of each individual and through the creation of a more humanizing lifestyle (Dunne, 1986). The community life follows a pattern of work (gardening, housekeeping, or workshop), meals, and recreation. At the heart of the community, members struggle to grow in "their capacity to be more open and loving within the ideals of communitarianism (Dunne, 1986, p. 47)." Dunne further suggests that sense of community, as experienced in l'Arche, is "an awareness of the relationships and accepting the risks, pain, and weaknesses encountered in self and others." (p. 53) In the years since its inception, more than 70 l'Arche communities have formed.

Needs Foundation

Other examples exist of ordinary citizens acting on the realization that people with disabilities or the elderly often need support that is not readily

available from family or society. One such individual is Bill Allison, the founder of the Needs Foundation. Bill's wife has multiple sclerosis and, Bill and his wife needed more in home support than insurance and their income allowed. Bill recognized that his family was not the only one faced with the need for affordable in-home assistance. While watching a television documentary highlighting the plight of the homeless, it occurred to Bill that probably there were homeless people who might be willing to be trained to provide in-home, non-medical care. Such an arrangement would benefit both individuals. The elderly person or the person with a disability would receive affordable assistance while the care giver acquires training, an alternative living arrangement, and work experience. The Needs Foundation facilitates matching care receivers and care givers through an extensive screening and matching process, to date more than 100 matches have been arranged (Ogintez, 1992). The individuals involved in these relationships find connectedness and a sense of community.

Oxford House

Individuals demonstrate surprising resilience in creating communities in an effort to promote their own healing and stability. There are hundreds of Oxford Houses across the country which were based on the model of the original Oxford House. It was founded by a group of men recovering from alcoholism. All were living in a half way house that had a finite length of stay which seemed all too short but was long enough for residents to watch former residents return after relapse. When funding was suddenly cutoff, notification was given to residents that they were going to have to vacate the house. Residents recognized their need for the house to continue and committed to renting it themselves, an effort supported and encouraged by the local Alcoholics Anonymous community. The basic rules of conduct for Oxford House were and remain simple: operate democratically with each member paying his or her rent and doing their chores, and staying sober. Deviation from these rules is cause for immediate eviction. There are no professional staff at Oxford Houses, and all costs for the program are covered by the members of the Oxford Houses.

Six months after the first Oxford House was formed it had enough resources to begin a second, they in turn worked to form a third. Within thirteen years the number of Oxford Houses had grown to more than twenty. Between 1988 and now the number has increased substantially. The history of the establishment of the original Oxford House demonstrates the tenacity of a group of people committed to changing their lives.

At this time a DePaul University based research team is involved with the Oxford Houses in Illinois in an effort to understand this model (Jason, et al., 1994). When the first author approached the leader of the Oxford House movement, he was eager to have the interest of the DePaul University researchers as well as their expertise in program evaluation. We, as community psychologists, have important roles to play helping to evaluate these attempts at building community. With our collaborative research orientation, we are uniquely qualified to work with these types of settings.

Other Initiatives

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe all the types of initiatives that citizens are involved in throughout the country that could fall under the community building rubric. However, as this section ends, we will briefly mention a few additional prominent community building efforts occurring in the country. Some Americans are experimenting with co-housing opportunities, a model borrowed from Europe (Intentional Communities, 1990). Scott Peck has created "The Foundation for Community Encouragement" which sponsors community building weekend workshops (Peck, 1987). And finally, Etzioni (1993) offered a community model for restoring values and recommitting ourselves to the social fiber of our communities.

All these communities were built by people with a vision and commitment to an ideal. Psychologists, professionals from other disciplines, and ordinary citizens have been involved in the creation of these settings. These types of comprehensive, healing environments might exist in many communities, but these settings have rarely been the focus of our work. We believe that these community building innovations represent the next frontier for community psychologists.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR OUR FIELD

Earlier we referred to an observation by Bellah et al. (1985) that there is an ever increasing emphasis on the individual and the tendency to look for fulfillment in the accumulation of income and status. Bellah and his colleagues believe that social interventions are needed that help people recover the narrative unity of their lives. Families could be nurtured by drawing on the larger community. Our lives could become enriched when we help and support others, and celebrate this life sustaining and vitalizing process. Bellah et al. (1985) state that there are traditions that can provide

us a morally and intellectually intelligible world, and these culturally rich traditions of our species can be conveyed through our families, religious organizations, and cultural associations. From religious texts, such as the old and new testaments, societies sharply divided between rich and poor were seen as against the wishes of God (Purpel, 1989). Bellah and his coauthors ask whether we can find ways to share our material wealth with others? The enormous challenge before us, according to Bellah et al., is to find practices of life that are inherently fulfilling, such as love and friendship for our fellow citizens.

Taking up the challenge of improving aversive social conditions has been a value stance since the inception of community psychology, though we have been bound to familiar paradigms (Heller, 1989). Meeting this challenge requires at once balancing the roles of researcher and activist. If our underlying assumption is true (i.e., lack of sense of community contributes to societal problems), then what roles can community psychologists take?

We see in the communities described professionals, ordinary citizens, and members of disenfranchised communities demonstrating the tenacity and creativity of many individuals working together. Individuals have mounted effective efforts against disability, alcoholism, aging, and isolation. What can we learn from these communities and how can we support others in their efforts to create community? How can we interact with them in supportive, educational, mutually beneficial ways without interfering with their course? In essence, how can we better understand what processes underlay the success of these communities and support similar success in other communities? Answering such questions requires us to look closely at our methods of both collaboration and research.

Price (1989) raises two questions crucial to community psychology. First, how do we better understand social and community life, so that social conditions can be improved, and second, how do we go about translating insights developed through research into improved conditions for our communities and society. Several models for answering these questions are highlighted, but Price argues that whatever model is eventually accepted in answering these questions must embody three basic impulses to action: community research requires that the community psychologist by partisan, carefully taking sides is a necessity; findings must be shared even when that means using non-traditional, non-academic ways; and, the truth must be told, a task often more subtle and demanding than it appears.

Kelly (1990) suggests four agendas for community psychology in the 1990's which are of value in setting community psychology's course. The agendas are as follows: (1) affirmation and sanction for multiple and alternative approaches to inquiry emphasize collaboration; (2) development

of collaboration with other disciplines and citizens; (3) increased attention to action research methods; (4) prevention interventions: creating a renewed interdependence between clinical psychology, community psychology, and public health.

The first three agendas are particularly relevant to the study of innovative and alternative communities. Community psychologists need increased support (financially, institutionally) that allows and promotes innovation. Looking at the cited examples of communities points all the more explicitly to a need to work collaboratively. Community psychologists do not have to develop innovative models from the ground up, but can draw on the rich resources that others have and in return provide expertise, particularly in the areas of program evaluation, grant writing, screening and training potential participants, and organizational consultation. The community psychologist's role might well be envisioned as participating in and helping to coordinate these collaborative team efforts. Observing these communities and documenting their processes requires flexibility in research methodology. Research in these types of settings is challenging.

To affect current problems we need to look at the deeper roots, to the breakdown in community. As scientists and activists we can influence the process of change, but finding solutions will require commitment and willingness to look critically at our methods, approaches, and values. Change very likely will require finding new traditions, norms, and values that are tied to the settings or communities in which we live. The notion of community represents a more comprehensive way of thinking about health and healing from the problems facing society. Combining strategies that strengthen inner resources through instilling hope, confidence, enthusiasm and the will to live as well as providing a place for people to live that is protected and nourishing. Such an approach represents a more comprehensive program. By adopting Price's (1989) impulses to action and Kelly's agendas, community psychologists have one possible framework for the future. Understanding the historical roots for the breakdown in a sense of community and how that contributes to highly visible problems in today's society may allow for these problems to be addressed in more substantial ways.

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