

Results of the Society for Community Research and Action Community Practice Survey

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Community practice has been a long standing interest for the Society for Community research and Action (SCRA). Recent resurgence in interest around this question is reflected in the work of the Community Practice Work Group, strong participation at the Community Practice Summit at the recent SCRA Biennial, and widespread contributions to and enthusiastic readership of the Community Practice column in *The Community Psychologist*. These forums have generated a series of reflections around questions such as: What is community practice in the field of community psychology? Who identifies as or should be considered community practitioners? Where do practitioners work? What kinds of work do they do, and what skills do they need and use? What kind of training have they received and would they find helpful? What is the ideal relationship between academic work and practice? And how can SCRA better support community practice and community practitioners?

These issues are fundamental to the field of community psychology for several reasons. There has been a growing concern that our field is facing a crisis, reflected in the low level of visibility of community psychology as a field, in growing difficulties recruiting students to graduate training programs, in the disappearance of several academic programs in community psychology, and a perceived declining membership (or participation) in SCRA. These trends give rise to the concern that fewer people are interested in community psychology and its approach to understanding and enhancing people's well being. In some ways, these trends may simply reflect a need to "market" our field better. More generally, these trends raise questions about different models of graduate education, those based on an apprenticeship model versus competency based models of training. Yet even more fundamentally, these trends should provoke us to ask, *What difference do we make and can we make as a field? How can we better support and magnify that impact?* Viewed in this light, trends of declining enrolment and membership go beyond questions of organisational or program survival to questions about the fundamental nature and importance of the field of community psychology. Many would argue that an important aspect of our "value added" is the field's concern for community practice and active involvement in community change.

These questions prompted a survey about community practice with SCRA members conducted in the fall of 2006. This article presents a portion of the results of the survey; additional results have been made available in summary report to the SCRA Executive Committee and additional results will be submitted for publication in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. In this article, we focus on results related to SCRA's role in supporting community practice. How does SCRA currently relate to and support members who engage in community practice? What do practicing members want and get out of the organisation and out of their participation in the organisation? What do people think of SCRA and its role in supporting community practice? What services, training, and/or activities could SCRA offer to better support practice and practitioners, or to otherwise help people with their community practice work?

In this survey, we did not attempt to define community practice or to define who is "really" a community practitioner. Discussions around this topic and proposed definitions have

been offered by Julian, Hernandez and Hodges (2006) and by Julian (2006). Instead, we asked respondents whether they self-identified as community practitioners and how much time they spent in community practice. In this sense, the vast majority of our respondents saw themselves as community practitioners. We note, however, that only a third of respondents spent 50% or more of their work time directly engaged in community practice, and that the responses of this group compared to the rest of the respondents looked quite different.

METHODS

As Community Practice Workgroup developed over the past several years, it became clear that we needed to get additional information from the current and past SCRA membership about issues related to practice, practitioners, and SCRA. With the help of the Executive Committee, members of the working group, participants of the SCRA email reflector, and others, we surveyed current, past, and prospective members. Several months of work yielded a six-page internet survey covering issues of defining community psychology practice and practitioners, training and competencies of practitioners, level of support and connection to SCRA more broadly, and background information about the respondents. Questions were a broad mix of quantitative and qualitative response possibilities. The internet survey was available for approximately 4.5 months, with three separate prompts on the SCRA email reflector and emails to current and past members, during that time. This effort yielded 310 completed surveys, from 2,576 potential respondents (approximately 13% response rate). There were less than 100 “bounced” emails.

The lead author obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from his home institution. The email invitations to potential respondents included information about IRB approval and contact information. The survey was completed anonymously. No attempt was made to connect completed surveys to email addresses or respondents. Response summaries further protected participants since all qualitative data were aggregated.

RESULTS

Once the survey was closed, the authors reviewed all the summarized responses. Two summaries follow. The first is a general analysis of all the responses. Following that is an analysis of responses based on the amount of time spent in practice. It became clear that collapsing respondents into two categories (from five original categories) would yield the clearest breakout between respondents indicating more time (>50%) or less time (<50%) in community psychology practice. Closer examination of the respondents indicated that there was a clear delineation between university-based researchers/practitioners and those respondents that were community-based researchers/practitioners. There was roughly an equal distribution of respondents indicating that they were predominantly community-based, corporate or government-based in each category of the breakout. However, there was an overwhelming number of university-based respondents (about 40% of all respondents) in the “<50% time in practice” category.

General Results

In reviewing the data, we were able to make several general statements about the respondents and their responses. Most respondents considered themselves both community psychologists and community practitioners. About 28% of respondents were still students, although most of the respondents who were done with school had attained doctoral degrees (60%). Most of the respondents worked in university settings, but other settings included government, community, and corporate. Only 35% of the respondents spent more than 50% time in practice. Just over half felt that they learned their practice in graduate school.

Most (75%) of respondents were members of SCRA, although many (76%) of respondents also voiced that they felt little or moderate connection to SCRA. Of this later group of respondents, most indicated “not sure” when describing what SCRA either does for them, or could do for them related to training, ongoing support, or advocacy.

Percent Time in Practice Analysis

While the responses for many questions were equally distributed across all the categories, there were several questions where “percent time spent in practice” revealed development opportunities for SCRA and community practice. To facilitate this analysis, we collapsed the original five response categories into two categories so that we could compare those respondents indicating more than 50% of their time spent in practice with those indicating less than 50% of time in practice.

Several questions in the survey related to affiliation with the broader field of community psychology practice and identification as a community psychologist. It was apparent that among those with more time spent in practice, respondents more strongly identified as community psychologists, and were more likely to identify themselves to others as a community psychologist. Also, as respondents indicated more time in practice, they were more likely to identify themselves as a community psychology practitioner or applied community psychologist.

In general, respondents in both categories reported learning most of their skills at a university (Q11, see Appendix), but results were split with over a third of all respondents learning many of their competencies outside of their university experience. This could mean that there is an opportunity to update competencies for university training or that there is a great opportunity for post-graduate education, or both.

Those respondents indicating a lower percent of time spent in community psychology practice were more likely to be members of SCRA (Q13). Many of the respondents indicating they were not currently members indicated that they had been a member in the past. Further, while many of the practitioners indicated they were SCRA members, most of them (about 80%) indicated feeling less connected to SCRA or that they were not getting much benefit from membership. It was clear that the more time spent in practice, the less valued by SCRA respondents felt and the less they felt that SCRA valued their role in community psychology practice.

DISCUSSION

Our experience with the survey, with SCRA as a society and with individual members is that people want to remain connected and help build community psychology as a field. We are struggling to both meet the needs of an academic and scientific audience that values practice and a practitioner audience that values training and science as promoted by the academy. These needs are not mutually exclusive and plenty of evidence exists from the survey to support that both points of view can be valued and supported by SCRA with a little work. Anecdotal evidence outside of the survey leads us to believe that there is an invisible constituency for community practice that includes many people not currently members of SCRA. This might include all those graduates of undergraduate and graduate community psychology programs who don't become members of SCRA. It might also include people trained in programs that include a community emphasis (e.g., public health education, urban planning). It remains to be seen how we can work together to contact, mobilize, and support these potentially large groups of people.

Those who work more than 50% time in practice typically work in settings such as foundations, public health, private practice, evaluation organizations, and government service. Needs for learning, capacity building, teaching others and sharing wisdom in a social context are as important to practitioners as to academics that are not strongly identified as practitioners. These results seem to indicate that SCRA could improve its support of community practitioners.

Limitations

There are several things that limit our analysis of the findings and our ability to generalize to a broader population. First, there was no access to those who are (or were) not currently members of SCRA. We should work with the Council on Graduate Education in Community Psychology to see if we can open this survey to their alumni (undergrad, master, and doctoral). Given the overwhelming response from persons with doctoral degrees, we are probably not getting masters level practitioners. Second, the respondents were self selected. Given the relatively low response rate, it is clear that we missed a lot of folks. This is true both for the respondents and in terms of those who choose not to be members of SCRA. We just don't know what we don't know at this point.

Next steps

Further summaries of this survey will explore additional themes. For example:

- How do people define community practice?
- What skills are used?
- For what skills should graduate training programs offer training?
- What skills should we offer to graduate students and to SCRA members interested in increasing their ability to work with community members and community groups?
- How do we best offer that training?

Possible follow up research includes:

- Interviews with those who spend 50% or more of their time in community practice – What support could SCRA offer?
- How can SCRA be more relevant?
- What do other organisations do that practitioners find particularly helpful?

Defining community practice and training competencies invoke issues related to standardizing the field, certification, etc. These have been and will likely continue to be vigorous debates within our profession. Certification, licensing and formalized training programs that offer specific competencies likely create easier access to resources such as legitimacy, visibility, and opportunities to claim and restrict job niches. Competency based models explicitly enumerate the skills and knowledge base that students can expect to acquire by investing a number of years in graduate school and what types of work they will be prepared for at the end of their course of study. However, professionalizing a field that has at its core an interest in social criticism and social change is viewed by some as inherently self-contradictory, while others argue we can best serve our constituencies by working at the margins. In the context of ongoing transformation of graduate education (apprentice model vs. competency based curricula) and demands for accountability, can we be more explicit about what different skills we offer without imposing credentialing systems? One thing is clear. Now that we started to explore these issues, we have a lot more work to do together.

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References

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APPENDIX: Survey Responses Analyzed by Less or More than 50% of Time Spent in Practice

		<50% time in practice	>50% time in practice
Q1: Do you think of yourself as a community psychologist?	No	13 (4.7%)	8 (2.8)
	Yes	157 (57.7%)	94 (34.5%)
Q2: When you describe what you do to others, do you identify yourself as a community psychologist?	No	70 (25.9%)	34 (12.5%)
	Yes	99 (36.6%)	68 (25.0%)
Q3: On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 represents very strong ties and 1 represents weak or no ties, how would you describe your connection to the profession of community psychology?	No	91 (33.2%)	43 (15.6%)
	Yes	82 (29.9%)	58 (21.1%)
Q4: Do you think of yourself as a community psychologist?	No	47 (18.2%)	5 (1.9%)
	Yes	116 (44.9%)	90 (34.8%)
Q8: Primary Affiliation	University	126 (73.6%)	45 (26.3%)
	Government agency	14 (50%)	14 (50%)
	Non-profit organization	24 (45.2%)	29 (54.7%)
	Private corporation	8 (38.0%)	13 (61.9%)
	Grassroots organization	1 (25%)	3 (75%)
	Self employed	9 (40.9%)	13 (59.0%)
Q11: In general, would you say you learned the skills you use in your community psychology practice work in your graduate training program?	No	60 (22.2%)	43 (15.9%)
	Yes	108 (40.0%)	59 (21.8%)
Q13: Are you a current member of the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA)?	No	31 (11.7%)	26 (9.8%)
	Yes	136 (51.5%)	71 (26.8%)
Q15: If you are not a current SCRA member, have you ever been a	No	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

member in the past?	Yes	27 (60%)	18 (40%)
Q17: On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents weak or no ties and 5 represents very strong ties, how would you describe your connection to the Society for Community Research and Action?	Weak ties	204 (59.8%)	77 (22.5%)
	Strong ties	41 (12.0%)	19 (5.5%)
Q19a: SCRA values me as a member.	Lower value	91 (37.8%)	49 (20.3%)
	Higher value	62 (25.7%)	39 (16.2%)
Q19b: My role as a practitioner is valued by SCRA.	Lower value	108 (43.2%)	55 (22.0%)
	Higher value	53 (21.2%)	34 (39.0%)
Q19c: SCRA values community psychology practice.	Lower value	40 (16.2%)	31 (12.6%)
	Higher value	115 (46.7%)	60 (24.3%)
Q19d: SCRA provides services valuable to community psychology practitioners.	Lower value	96 (39.3%)	46 (18.9%)
	Higher value	59 (24.2%)	43 (17.6%)
Q19e: SCRA provides services valuable to the academic community.	Lower value	28 (11.3%)	14 (5.6%)
	Higher value	129 (52.2%)	76 (30.8%)
Q19f: The Community Psychologist provides information that supports community psychology practice.	Less information	55 (22.6%)	38 (15.6%)
	More information	99 (40.7%)	51 (20.9%)

Q19g: The American Journal of Community Psychology provides information that supports community psychology practice.		Less information	60 (21.8%)	70 (25.5%)
		More information	97 (35.3%)	48 (17.8%)
Q19h: The SCRA Biennial Conference provides information that supports community psychology practice.		Less information	70 (28.3%)	45 (18.2%)
		More information	88 (35.6%)	44 (17.8%)
Q20: Which of the following degrees have you completed?	Undergraduate degree	No	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
		Yes	44 (57.1%)	33 (42.9%)
	Masters degree	No	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
		Yes	49 (53.3%)	43 (46.7%)
	PhD degree	No	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
		Yes	109 (67.7%)	52 (32.2%)