A Future for Community Psychology Practice

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Community psychology has never really looked at its practice as a profession, though many of us as students came to the field with high expectations that we could learn how to make a difference in communities. This article discussed what I think about community psychology practice and how I have tried to approach it.

KEY WORDS: community psychology practice; person–institution fit; collaboration; resource linkage.

This award provides me with the opportunity to share what I really care about professionally with others in the field. Many of us have developed an aversion to the question what is community psychology? For me, without definition, we have no direction. Without a direction, we can have no collective impact. Without a promise of impact, why belong?

I have faith in a community psychology that I hope my story will tell. I believe in the future of the field and describe one future for the practice of community psychology. I believe most of all in the true guardians of that future, our students. I dedicate this paper and the award to them. We can address the challenges of our times.

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The relationship between people and their institutions is a fundamental challenge of our nation that I believe community psychology is uniquely poised to address at a time when other professions have moved away. Today we are witnessing a major challenge to the legitimacy of almost all of our institutions. We have come to the point that our institutions may be their own worst enemies. The American people trust few and fear most of them. The most exciting word in this past presidential election year has been the word change. The excitement is not about the possibility of a change in personality in the White House. What is exciting and inspiring is the possibility that our institutions will change. We hope that our institutions will return to serving all of their public—schools will educate all children, health systems will promote health for all, law enforcement will provide security for all, businesses will develop jobs for all, religious institutions and voluntary associations will develop morality and community for all, and government will be able to govern for all of us.

Institutions are formally defined by sociologists as expected patterns of group or individual behavior that carry positive and negative sanctions (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1991). Barker and Schoggens (1973) called them behavior settings. Institutions are the ecologies where human development occurs—families, schools, neighborhoods, religious institutions, workplaces, and other voluntary institutions provide the fertile soil for health and well being. Strengthening the ability of these institutions to live up to the dreams of their members must be our goal.

Community psychology has a foundation to respond to this challenge. Community represents our most valued notion of institution and psychology represents an important understanding of the individual. As community psychologists, we must bring together this knowledge of people and institutions. We must develop the skills to help revitalize and renovate our most basic institutions.

A practicing community psychologist can act as the technician for the process of democratization of these institutions that is occurring throughout our nation (Naisbitt, 1982; Bellah et al., 1991). The democratization of institutions means greater responsiveness, accountability, and citizen participation.

We can (and many of us have) help institutional leaders—governors, school principals, neighborhood leaders, hospital and bank presidents, foundations, and human service agencies—to develop the capacity within their institution to reach out to learn about the strengths, needs, and