Community Psychology: An Introduction
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Community psychology presents a complementary perspective to traditional clinical psychology. Community psychologists focus on preventing mental disorders before they occur, and more generally on promoting mental health. They often address these goals by studying, designing, and implementing programs and policies that build communities (schools, neighborhoods, the larger society, etc.) which are more conducive to good mental health. Topics of interest to community psychologists include prevention, program evaluation, change and creation of settings, psychological conceptions of the environment, coping and social support, community organization and development, empowerment and social action, mutual help, participant research, social justice, social policy, and ethics of community intervention.

Community Psychology: A Break from the Medical Model

Traditional clinical psychology has its origins in the field of medicine, and, indeed, many of the pioneers of clinical psychology (such as Sigmund Freud) were physicians. Its not surprising, therefore, that early clinicians borrowed ideas from the field of medicine to help them understand psychological problems. They assumed that, like physical ailments, psychological disorders are best thought of as residing in the person. Only after a person develops a psychological disorder does that person receive help. Usually that help requires the suffering individual to seek out some professional healer, who then treats the individual. Together, these assumptions constitute the "medical model" which was applied without second thought to the problems of psychological suffering.

In the mid 1960's, a group of psychologists decided to formally break with the medical model. They noted several problems with the assumptions that it posed.

**Help is only received after a person develops a problem.** Community psychologists recognize that treatment of problems must be balanced with prevention. If we can prevent psychological problems before they occur, we can eliminate a great deal of needless suffering. Prevention is also thought to be more cost-effective than treatment, since it allows you to quickly "nip a problem in the bud" rather than having to spend a great deal more time treating a full-blown problem. Another problem is that many people may not be amenable to the types of psychological treatment currently available. For example, "talking therapies" tend to be most effective when used with clients who fit a certain profile. Research shows that clients who are young, attractive, verbal, intelligent, and successful do best in therapy, hardly the clients who are having the most difficult problems! While we will probably never be able to prevent all psychological problems, we can at least greatly reduce the number of people who will need treatment.

**The problem is always in the person.** Prevention can focus on changing individuals or on changing social settings. Rather than seeing a problem as necessarily residing in a person, community psychologists borrowed from ecologists the concept of person-environment fit. Simply, this principle states that problems arise when there is a mismatch between a person and
the surrounding environment. While one way to solve these problems is to change the person to better fit the environment, another solution is to change the environment to better meet the needs of diverse people. For example, research has found that many students experience a decline in well-being upon making the transition from grade school to middle school. An individual level solution to this problem would constitute providing grade school children with special training in specific coping skills so that they will better adjust to the middle school setting. On the other hand, an environmental level solution might involve changing the organization of the middle school so that it is more in line with the developmental needs of early adolescents. Note also that the individual level solution can have the subtle effect of "blaming the victim" for his or her own problem.

In trying to change the environment, community psychologists engage in a variety of activities. Some work to organize communities so that people feel a stronger sense of belonging. Others work in schools or other organizational settings to create environments that are more conducive to good mental health. Still others work in the political realm, advocating for public policy that is likely to create a more mentally healthy society.

Clients should seek out a professional helper. Rather than waiting for clients to bring themselves to therapy, community psychologists advocate for outreach into communities. Community psychologists also question the assumption that professionals are always the best source of help for those in need. Community psychologists often study mutual help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which focus on peer support. Community psychologists recognize that people are often the best experts on their own problems, and seek to collaborate with groups in need of help, rather than assuming that the expert always knows best. Community psychologists also seek to empower client populations to take charge of their own lives, and help them organize in order to achieve more social power, so that they can effectively advocate for themselves.