

An Action Roundtable:
Bringing together Community Psychology and
Religion/Spirituality:
Towards an action-research agenda for SCRA

Friday June 11, 1999
Seventh Biennial Conference on Community Research and Action
Yale University
New Haven, CT

Chair:

Jeffrey S. Kress University of Medicine and Dentistry of NJ

Panelists:

Kathleen H. Dockett University of the District of Columbia
Kelly Hazel University of Alaska Fairbanks
Linda Anne Ranard Maryhill Renewal Center

Discussants:

Bill Berkowitz University of Massachusetts Lowell
Paul R. Dokecki Vanderbilt University

Small Group Facilitators:

Maurice J. Elias Rutgers University
Lynne Mock University of Illinois Chicago
Douglas D. Perkins University of Utah

The Jewish Identity Development Project

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Broadly defined, our work can be summarized by the Jewish version of the African proverb: It takes a *Kehilla* (community) to make a *mensh*. The Jewish Identity Development Project (JIDP) began with a survey of approximately 400 students in grades 5-7, representing the three major American Jewish denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform), from both Day Schools and Temple-based Sunday Schools. Results indicated effects of both denomination and type of school on the way students cope with stressors (Kress, Elias, & Novick, 1995), and how willing students are to interact with people of different background (Kress, Elias, Novick, Schoenfeld & Zibbell, 1995).

Gaining an appreciation from this survey of the effects of constructs having to do with Jewish identity, the JIDP progressed with an examination of a) how students conceptualize their own Jewish identity, and b) what factors influence the development of such an identity. This follow-up project took the form of in-depth surveys and interview of 6th and 7th grade students and their families. Findings highlighted the importance of Jewish communal settings and family rituals in perpetuating a sense of Jewish identity (Kress, 1998).

The action component of the project refers to implementing interventions based on our research in a variety of settings, including After-school Conservative Religious Schools, Conservative and Orthodox Day Schools, Jewish special education classrooms, and secular schools. While we are at an early stage of carrying out this work, the action component has created a clear synergy within our research. As we continue to analyze existing data and pursue our work with Religious Schools, we are also moving into studying identity development in college students (Yares, 1998, 1999). Throughout our work, we have used concepts from community psychology as important guideposts.

In our upcoming article in the special issues of JCP (Kress & Elias, in press), we have organized these guideposts into four themes:

- " Theme 1: There is the potential for issues of religion and spirituality to play a major role in how we define ourselves, and to have an impact on broader issues of identity.
- " Theme 2: A contextual/ecological framework is useful in the discussion of the development of a religious identity. Theme 3: There is a relationship of variables representing constructs having to do with religion and a number of positive psychosocial outcomes. This suggests that factors related to religious beliefs and/or observances are relevant to problem behaviors and the promotion of healthy outcomes.
- " Theme 4: Community psychologists must work to develop an understanding of the subtle differences in the nature of religious belief systems, and in the ecological make-up of religious settings. We risk misinterpretation when we try to generalize too broadly across belief systems or settings.

Some of the ongoing issues, in addition to those mentioned above, which occupy our thinking include: how to describe/quantify Jewish identity outcomes in a way which is both broad enough to include the variety of expressions of Judaism, but not so broad as to be meaningless and how to work with Jewish identity development within the rubric of school-based social-competence promotion.

Related References

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- Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (1997, January). Themes in Jewish educational action-research. Presented in D. Yakobi (symposium chair), Meeting the needs of the Jewish adolescent; 45th Annual Jewish Educator Assembly Conference, Rye, NY.
- Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (Summer, 1998). It takes a Kehilla to make a mensch: Building Jewish identity as part of overall identity. Jewish Education News, 19, 20-24.
- Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (in press). Infusing Community Psychology and Religion: Themes From An Action-Research Project in Jewish Identity Development Journal of Community Psychology.
- Kress, J. S., Elias, M. J., & Novick, J. (1995, March). Religiosity and coping in children: Preliminary findings from a sample of Jewish students. Poster presented at the Biennial Conference of the Society for Research in Child Development, Indianapolis, IN.
- Kress, J. S., Elias, M. J., Novick, J., Schoenfeld, M., & Zibbell, R. (1995, June). Paradox or possibility: Community cohesion and the acceptance of "outsiders". Poster presented at the Biennial Conference of the Society for Community Research and Action, Chicago, IL.
- Yares, A. S. (1998). Factors affecting affiliation with campus organizations among Jewish college students. Unpublished Independent Study Thesis, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Yares, A. S. (1999). Ethnic and religious identity in Jewish and non-Jewish college students. Unpublished Henry Rutgers Honors Thesis, Rutgers College, New Brunswick, NJ.

Religion and politics DO mix: Citizen participation and advocacy

Douglas D. Perkins
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My interests in religion and community psychology are two-fold. First is the importance of organized religious involvement in my research on citizen participation in grassroots community development organizations. One of the most consistent predictors of current and future participation in secular neighborhood improvement associations (in Baltimore, MD) and community councils (in Salt Lake City, UT), at both the individual and community levels, is involvement in service work through one's religious congregation (Perkins, Brown, & Taylor, 1996). This may not be surprising to many, but it suggests that (a) people are not simply divided into religiously-motivated volunteers and the more secular and civic-minded local grassroots political volunteers-- it is largely the same people who tend to do both; and (b) religiously-based service work may provide a useful gateway and setting for recruiting members and leaders of neighborhood and advocacy organizations.

There are important and potentially complicated issues in forming political coalitions among people with differing religious backgrounds and agendas, however. And this is my second area of interest in the role of religion and spirituality in community psychology. I am a member of the Coalition of Religious Communities (CORC), an ecumenical church-based social justice political advocacy coalition in Utah (website: <http://www.xmission.com/~xrdsurb/>). I am also CORC's liaison to the Board of Utah Issues (<http://www.xmission.com:80/~ui/>), a secular nonprofit political education and advocacy organization. Both organizations focus mainly on state and local poverty issues, such as affordable housing. Interestingly, there seem to be fewer points of disagreement between these two organizations than within the religious one alone. I am also concerned about the religious coalition struggling for active membership.

Finally, I'd be interested in exploring a SCRA Interest Group on Religion and Spirituality. I'm also a member of the Community Development Society (website: <http://comm-dev.org>), which has a Section (IG) on spirituality. Contacts for this section are:

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Reference:

Perkins, D.D., Brown, B.B., & Taylor, R.B. (1996). The ecology of empowerment: Predicting participation in community organizations. *Journal of Social Issues*, 52, 85-110.

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TO: Biennial Panel on Spirituality

RE: Introduction of Sister Linda Anne Ranard, ASC, MCP

I am delighted to have this opportunity to introduce myself in absentia. I am a Roman Catholic Sister in an international community called the Adorers of the Blood of Christ. With a Masters Degree in Community Psychology and a veteran of 27 years of religious life, I approach the nature of spiritual development in the applied setting in a holistic manner.

Spirituality has a significant impact upon the psychology of a community. It strengthens not only the faith life of every person, but it also maintains a level of hope and peace while change processes are being initiated in the community. Spirituality is that element of our psycho-social fabric that opens us to reflection, healing, support, reconciliation, inner harmony, social responsibility, creativity, patience, hope, and the desire to stay engaged and active in the processes of living. Spiritual issues are inextricably linked with social settings.

Currently, I live and minister at Maryhill Renewal Center, Pineville, Louisiana. A rural area, Maryhill's 250 acres of pine forest nestle 28 buildings, a hermitage, and a lake. Various elements of the ministry include: administration, hospitality, designing and conducting worship services, music, preaching, retreat directing, lecturing both on and off-site, and tutoring as well as practicing spiritual direction and mentoring those beginning to serve as spiritual directors. I am also a CASA volunteer for the 7th Judicial District of Louisiana and a member of the Advisory Board at Renaissance House (a juvenile detention center).

In addition to the on-site ministry, there are a number of opportunities to spend time in out-lying parishes to preach about the practical application of the principles of the Judeo-Christian faith. The Center welcomes any religious denomination and has, thus, become an inclusive facility for non-Catholics, people of color, those who are in need of emotional and spiritual support, and those who strive for spiritual maturity.

In my own congregation we are merging three American provinces. The application of Community Psychology principles together with religious values is intimately interrelated. Being a member of the five-sister committee to write a new governance plan for 600 sisters also gives me the opportunity to create a holistic process to bridge the moments of uncertainty while strengthening community capacity. The merger reflects in miniature the change processes inherent in forming organic, dynamic, and empowering communities.

My philosophy of the role of Community Psychology is one of being in the community and for the community with a respectful attention to the history of the social setting. Understanding the philosophy, the momentum, and the complex influences at work in the community and its individuals enhances the professional's ability to be culturally sensitive. This sensitivity must reach beyond cultural appreciation such as foods, music, and entertainment. Cultural sensitivity reaches into the soul and the blood

of the people to learn what makes them weep, what makes them angry, and what makes them soar and dance. We need to explore the meaning of concepts in their lives, concepts such as justice, love, power, empowerment, collaboration, peace and harmony, social responsibility, and respect, while delving into the meaning of the community's social institutions; e.g., family, church, government, and neighborhood.

Sensitivity to culture, ethnicity, religion, education, and socio-economic components of the people among whom we serve requires an inward examination by the professional in order to root out subtle and overt personal flaws which are racist, paternalistic, privileged, aloof in the face of poverty, and removed social suffering. Without the continuous habit of reflection and prayer, and the willingness to embrace personal responsibility, a personal agenda or righteous expectations may hamper the professional's ability to be an agent for meaningful change. This reflection and the application of the fruit of that reflection is primarily a spiritual process.

Simplistic methods rather than the more arduous collaborative methods will not create the momentum and potential for effecting paradigm shifts or for promoting empowerment in communities. Interconnecting processes may be slower. Spirituality, together with community psychology frameworks, assists the community to prefer patience over willfulness, to prefer teaching over mandating, to prefer collaboration over hierarchical models, to prefer inclusion over exclusion, to prefer consensus over power, and to prefer the forces of ambiguity which stimulate us to creativity over comfortable passivity and inflexible structures. Collaboration, then, fosters a one-among-equals spirit. It is a process that shares wisdom, one where working groups of people come to the table with their unique gifts, roles, levels of authority, and willingness to solve human problems. In this environment the stage is set for effective change where all persons may perceive themselves as empowered, and therefore respond with their totality of each person's being for the benefit of the community.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my creative expression of the spiritual and professional dimensions of my work. I truly hope that this Biennial Panel may be a means to continue the discussion of our role as community psychologists and the faith response of humankind.

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