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## **The Research Psychologist as Social Change Agent<sup>1</sup>**

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Behavioral and social scientists have long debated two contrasting philosophies of research. One holds the value of “scientific neutrality” supreme and strives to keep the investigative process detached from politics, values, and social change (see Platt, 1964; Weber, 1946). The other emphasizes the historical and value-laden underpinnings of social science and encourages researchers both to recognize and actively strengthen the connections between their scientific work, their personal values, and prosocial efforts toward community change (see Gergen, 1982; Habermas, 1971; Sarason, 1974). Many psychologists who study the complex transactions between people and their environments navigate between these two philosophical positions rather than remaining anchored at either pole (see Saegert, in press). To the extent possible, we strive toward the ideals of objectivity, reliability, and validity in our research. Yet, the positivist vision of a detached social science seems fundamentally at odds with our professional and personal interests in environmental optimization and social change. So throughout our careers, we attempt to reconcile the opposing values of scientific neutrality and community change.

Against this backdrop of debate between positivist and critical philosophies of science, Kelly’s (1986) analysis of the links between community research and practice is provocative and important. First, Kelly offers a strong and optimistic statement of the compatibility between the methods and goals

<sup>1</sup>These comments were originally presented in response to James Kelly’s invited address to the Division of Community Psychology, entitled “Context and Process: An Ecological View of the Interdependence of Practice and Research,” at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, on August 24, 1985, in Los Angeles, California.

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of psychological research, on the one hand, and the promotion of community social networks and cohesion, on the other. In the spirit of Lewin's (1948) "action research", Kelly urges community psychologists to apply their scientific skills and expertise toward the betterment of society—for example, through the preservation of community social networks and the empowerment of their individual members. Furthermore, rather than suggesting that psychological research is simply a practical means for achieving desirable social change, Kelly contends that the processes of community research and intervention form a reciprocal or transactional unity. That is, our theories and methods are not merely "applied" to social problems but are also fundamentally *derived* and *validated* through our immersion as participants in the networks we study and through our active involvement in community problem solving.

Kelly offers not only a clear and compelling statement of the interdependence between community intervention and research but also a reference point from which to explore contrasting views of social science and social change. Kelly's research philosophy is founded on at least two key assumptions. First, he regards social networks as the arenas in which positive developmental experiences and personal empowerment occur. As such, they are valuable community resources that should be cultivated, strengthened, and preserved. Second, he contends that researchers should strive to become embedded in and aligned with the networks they study, thereby encouraging the spontaneous participation of network members as co-equals in the research process. By establishing mutual trust and informal communication between the researcher and network members, new scientific concepts and methods can emerge that are firmly grounded in the realities of day-to-day community concerns and structure.

As a psychologist sympathetic to transactional and contextualist views of research, I find much to agree with in Kelly's paper. I am persuaded by the logic of anchoring our concepts, methods, and findings within ongoing, naturalistic settings; involving community members as active participants in the research process; and doing research that has the potential to promote positive social and environmental change (Stokols, in press). At the same time, however, I believe that the opportunities for fusing scientific and social change strategies depend greatly on certain key situational factors. Thus, I am less optimistic than Kelly about the potential for merging scientific and social change agendas within all types of community settings. Instead, I favor a "matching strategy" by which our scientific and intervention approaches are tailored to the unique requirements of each situation.

To develop the proposed matching strategy, we must begin with a rather pluralistic and differentiated view of (a) community networks, (b) the multiple objectives of scientific studies, and (c) the varieties of social change that

may result either directly or indirectly from our research. For instance, even a preliminary and partial list of the structural features of social networks suggests that they vary widely in terms of their membership size, formality or informality, duration of existence, and the degree of conflict or harmony among subgroups and coalitions. Assuming for the moment that social change is an intended outcome of one's research, the effectiveness of the researcher as a change agent is likely to be more limited within large, bureaucratized networks than in small, informal ones. The establishment of open communication between the researcher and network members may be considerably more difficult within larger and more formally structured groups. Moreover, the presence of subgroups and coalitions within social networks may create a climate of internal conflict that can severely hamper the researcher's efforts to win the trust of group members and to work effectively with them. Within the context of conflict-ridden networks, the goal of "empowering" network members, advocated by Kelly, becomes quite complex as it raises questions not only about how best to support the personal development of individuals but also about which coalitions in the network are most likely to gain or lose power by collaborating with the researcher.

The researcher's effectiveness as a change agent also may depend on the developmental history the group. For example, opportunities to establish a supportive social climate among network members may be greater during the early, formative phases of a group than during its subsequent and more routinized stages. Moreover, the kinds of social change that are desirable and feasible may shift throughout the various stages of group development. During the group's early stages, the focus of research and intervention may be on processes of membership recruitment and friendship formation. During subsequent phases of crisis or dissolution, however, social change efforts may be directed toward issues of coping and stress, or the retraining and relocation of former group members. Thus, whereas Kelly emphasizes the cultivation and preservation of community networks as desirable outcomes of research, these general goals can be further differentiated into more specific intervention objectives (e.g., fostering supportive social contacts, building coping resources, reducing stress, maximizing opportunities for education and personal growth), whose timing and feasibility shift according to the structure and developmental history of the group.

To this point, we have assumed that positive social change is always an intended outcome of community psychological research. Yet, in many instances, the scientific goals of evaluation, discovery, and understanding do not coincide perfectly with those of solving community problems and promoting social change. In program evaluation projects, for example, the major goal of the research usually is to assess the efficacy of alternative interventions as they are implemented and compared across multiple net-

works, rather than to solidify and preserve the networks themselves. Once the evaluative data are gathered, they may be used as a basis for designing future interventions to enhance the development and preservation of social networks. But during the initial phases of such research, theoretical and methodological concerns often take precedence over the goal of promoting social change. Also, it is important to note that program evaluation projects usually require large teams of researchers (e.g., interviewers, observers) who must coordinate with the representatives of community groups, making it all the more difficult for the individual community psychologist to establish direct and informal communications with network members.

Thus, the design and major objectives of a community research project are crucial considerations when trying to gauge the compatibility between scientific and social-change agendas. On the one hand, the logistical and methodological challenges of conducting rigorous field-experimental studies may require that the researcher adopt a rather distant and formal stance toward members of the "host" networks and settings. In those situations, the researcher must exert a "heavier hand" to ensure that all phases of the study are managed properly and, consequently, may give relatively little attention to the immediate concerns and problems of participants in the study. On the other hand, certain research and consultation projects are less constrained by logistical and methodological concerns and, therefore, offer greater opportunities for establishing an informal and mutually supportive relationship between the researcher and group members. For instance, when a psychologist is invited by a group to serve as an educational consultant (e.g., to organize a series of workshops for group members) or to develop programs for improving organizational effectiveness and well-being, he or she can adopt a "light touch" (Kelly, 1986) with group members, due to the absence of an explicit research design and its inherent methodological constraints. Also, the consultation role by its very nature encourages psychologists to take a more supportive, problem-solving stance toward community groups than is usually possible when they are conducting tightly structured evaluation studies.

In summary, Kelly (1986) has articulated a philosophy of community research that emphasizes the values of strengthening social networks, enhancing opportunities for personal growth and development, and approaching network members as co-equal participants in the research process. Although these prosocial goals may be appropriate and attainable in some research settings, they may be incompatible with scientific objectives and methodological requirements in other situations. Thus, in responding to Kelly's position, I have suggested that the scientific and social-change goals of our research should be tailored to the unique circumstances and community resources surrounding each project. Whether or not those goals are mutual-

ly compatible may depend on several situational factors such as the organizational structure of community groups participating in the research; the types of social change that are most desirable at various stages in a group's development; and the predominant scientific objectives of the research. According to this perspective, scientific and social-change goals converge in some community research settings but diverge in others. By adopting a more differentiated view of social networks, social change, research roles and agendas, we may be better able to categorize community research situations according to the opportunities they afford for achieving scientific as well as social-change goals.

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