Scientists in the Swamp: Narrowing the Language–Practice Gap in Community Psychology

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As a confluence of unique values and activities, the collective practice of community psychology is difficult to characterize in a simple way. Increasingly, however, professional contexts are laden with pressure to define any practice—from library work to medical interventions—in the orderly, compact language of traditional science. This trend has historically been resisted in the field by those sensing a fundamental lack of fit between the fluid, emergent aspects of community psychological practice and the fixed, precise language of classic science. In response to this "language–practice gap," some have attempted to adapt the traditional language of science to better fit the field’s practice, while others have explored alternative languages of practice seemingly more indigenous to the messy "swamp" of actual communities. While the former effort leaves some theoretical contradictions intact, the latter tends to discount scientific identity entirely. This paper proposes a potential step forward by resituating questions of disciplinary language and identity within a current philosophical discourse where the nature of social science itself remains sharply contested. This suggests shifting attention away from "should we be a science?" to "what kind of science might we be after all?"; in turn, alternative languages may be re-cast as legitimate contributors to a kind of science more authentic to human communities—even a viable "science in the swamp." One such language—philosophical hermeneutics—is presented as a particularly valuable complement to traditional science. Illustrations highlight ways that hermeneutics may advance the formal language of the field towards a closer fit of what actually happens in practice, while preserving and even bolstering the empirical rigor and scientific identity of the field.

KEY WORDS: science; community psychology; hermeneutics; language; dialogue; practice.

"Ahh, community psychologists, trying to figure out who they are…again. Still" (Charvat, 2003).

Amusing to some and embarrassing to others, a wrestle continues in the field of community psychology around the question of disciplinary identity. In its collective practice, community psychology evinces a remarkably diverse confluence of unique values and activities. A practitioner can one day be grappling with theoretical issues, the next day supervising outreach programs and the following day participating in a policy forum in the community. This pluralistic practice is also reflected in disciplinary values strikingly unusual for professional work, including an appreciation of fluidity, an attention to particular and holistic viewpoints, and a commitment to collaborative relationships with non-professionals. Given the field’s uniqueness, some persisting difficulty in knowing best how to characterize its practice should not be surprising.

This difficulty is further augmented within professional contexts increasingly loaded with pressure to define practice in the language of traditional science (e.g. science-based classrooms, medical practice). In spite of the legitimacy such language offers, the history of community psychology reflects longstanding concern around the "goodness of fit" between its practice and the customary language of...
classic science. How well, for example, can community organizing be captured in a technical manual? To what degree can participant action research be condensed into linear steps or methodological formulae? With such a practice, in such a changing professional context, little wonder the field has struggled to speak in definitive and satisfying ways of both its collective practice and its professional identity.

Schon (1987) has explored similar tensions in professional practice using imagery of two contrasting and adjacent geographies—a “swamp” and a “high, hard ground” overlooking the swamp (p. 3). On the metaphor high ground, “manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique.” The language here is crisp and precise; problems are explicit and clear, as are the tools developed to solve these problems. This image resonates generally with the traditional practice of science as happening in academics, labs, journals, and research conferences—as well as its applications in intervention protocol, instruments and technology. In the shadow of this high ground, then, lies the swamp—a place where “confusing problems defy technical solution.” The indigenous language here is flexible and less precise; problems can be interpreted in different ways and tend to be “ill-structured” (Mitroff, 1983), with potential solutions even more so. This is the place of normal living in families, neighborhoods, schools and communities—hence, the location of “problems of greatest human concern” (Schon, p. 3) and the site of much of community psychology’s actual practice—both research and intervention.

Metaphorically, then, community psychology may be described as straddling these distinct cultural terrains in its practice—alternately engaging both messy communities and orderly academies. In doing so, its practitioners have come to develop considerable “bicultural competency” in translating and acting across settings. As typical of boundaries, however, tensions arise from impulses to proselytize or colonize the other side. In this case, traditional science has operated under a manifest to continually search for more ways to apply itself to benefit the habits of messy, daily life. As a result, the “swamp” of actual community living has become a primary site for the application of science. In turn, these native community activities are back-translated into the traditional language of science to maintain academic credibility.

Although normative for applied science, this translation between spheres of practice manifests some fundamental, unresolved issues. For example, the infamous “research–practice gap” reflects a nagging difficulty in successfully applying scientific products and models to actual practice on the ground. In the reverse direction, the adequacy of translating on-the-ground practice into scientific terminology has been increasingly challenged. Elias (1994), for instance, notes that most community psychology interventions are “not strictly ‘technologies’ although we have used the term to make what we do seem more approachable and systematic than it might otherwise appear” (p. 296). Trickett (1996) raises a similar concern with the “discrepancy between the ways in which we construct our work for publication and the ways in which we actually conduct it” (p. 516).

At issue then, is a fundamental wrestle with the field’s language of practice. “Practice” is used here in the omnibus sense of “what a community psychologist does” rather than as a contrast to research. More precisely, it is a complex set of actions coherently organized and oriented towards common aims (see Dokecki, 1996, pp. 14–15). “Language of practice,” in turn, refers to the signs, symbols and words by which this coherent practice of the field comes to be expressed and realized (Schwandt, 2001). This definition reflects advances in linguistic philosophy which have established language as something more than an abstract, transparent medium for communication. Rather, different languages employed are understood to have distinct and tangible impacts on how we come to experience the world—shaping both “what we see and how we see it” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 143). In this case, traditional science may be understood as one particular “language of practice” with considerable influence in society. The question taken up in this paper is how to constructively address community psychology’s chronic struggle in fitting the traditional language of science to its actual practice in the “swamp” of communities. Across the discipline, responses to this question have varied.

One response would indict inexactness in the adoption of scientific language as a barrier to increased legitimacy as a field. Persisting debate on disciplinary identity, from this view, threatens to sabotage the field’s credibility among other scientists, as well as in the general public. With its seemingly unquestioned faith in the sufficiency of traditional science, this response has been palatable to few in the field.
A second response might agree that disciplinary progress is linked to identity as a science, but would dispute the ease of this loyalty. From this perspective, any language–practice gap would need to be confronted squarely—leading, for example, to refinements of theoretical models, elaborations of research protocol, and development of tools increasingly sensitive to context. Prevention science exemplifies this constant improvement of methods, measures and protocol towards a better match of its complex object of study. Overall, these efforts aspire to better capture human phenomena through a progressive reformation of scientific language. Since the specific aim of adapting traditional science is never questioned, however, some fundamental contradictions remain. For example, can a model of separable factors ever truly capture a holistic community phenomenon? Can unilateral, deterministic intervention models adequately account for human spontaneity and agency? How can objective research methods disclose the operation of values in human experience?

A third response begins with the same concern over language–practice fit in community psychology, but pursues a different strategy. Rather than attempting to refine traditional scientific language, this would challenge its status as the primary tongue of the field. Rappaport (2003; 2005, see this issue), for instance, has recently issued a stinging appraisal of the limitations of classic scientific language to adequately account for what community psychologists do. From this view, it could be said that a reformation of traditional science alone is not enough to address its fundamental constraints as a language of practice for the field. Consequently, attention is directed to alternative languages arguably more “indigenous” to practice in the swamp. Feminism, for example, continues to powerfully influence a refashioning of language towards more contextual, reflexive, and collaborative bases (Harding, 1991; Hill, Bond, Mulvey, & Terenzi, 2000). Ecological thought has similarly diversified the field’s collective language in its emphasis on the interdependent and evolving nature of settings (Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990).

In spite of offering increasing authenticity to descriptions of the field’s practice, these languages can be subtly minimized in two ways. First, they may be seen as valuable in a general sense, but peripheral to actual details of scientific activity. While feminist or constructionist insights are clearly valued in the field, for instance, their specific implications for scientific research and epistemology are less appreciated and understood. Second, more than simply questioned in their scientific contributions, these nontraditional languages may also be seen as potential threats to the field’s scientific credibility. Especially given the current professional pressures to be scientific, serious efforts to apply such languages to actual practice may convey a lack of certainty—or worse, an impression of “waffling” in our conclusions! To be sure, this concern is not without basis, since some postmodern theorists uphold notions that may dilute the field’s impecuniosity as a science (i.e. denying the existence of truth). In this way, however, the credibility of alternative languages becomes undermined as a whole, reinforcing a general predisposition to limit formal portrayals of community psychology practice to the language of traditional science.

This paper proposes a change in how alternatives of practice are perceived and received in the field. The key shift may come by resituating the questions of disciplinary language and scientific identity into a larger philosophical context of social science where the very nature of social science itself remains sharply contested. It is here that important cutting-edge work by social science philosophers has established that languages beyond that of traditional science can be viable contributors to a unique “human science” (see Polkinghorne, 1983; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987; Smith, 1994; Slife & Williams, 1995; Koch, 1999; Giorgi, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Taylor, 2002). Reframed against this backdrop, critics such as Rappaport (2003; 2005, see this issue) may be understood not as rejecting disciplinary identity as a “science” at all. Rather, they may be seen as opposing primary identity as a certain kind of science. Kelly (2003), for instance, recently characterized the field as “going against established norms of what scientific means” (p. 214) (rather than going against “science” in general). In Schön’s imagery, this suggests considering the community “swamp” a viable site for innovative varieties of home-grown science, rather than simply a place for the application of the imported “high ground” variety. In this way, feminism, for example, may be leveraged as much as a contributor to scientific epistemology as to the understanding of relationships in the field (Harding, 1991; Hill et al., 2000). Overall, this change in philosophical context may potentially shift attention from “should we be a science?” to “what kind of science should we be after all?”

The aim of this paper is to take additional steps in articulating what such an expanded language
of scientific practice would look like in community psychology. Insights from one tradition of continental philosophy in particular—philosophical hermeneutics—will be drawn on for this purpose. Other schools of thought, including feminism, constructionism, and ecological thought, will likewise be referenced as resonant languages that encourage steps in the same direction. Hermeneutics is proposed to complement these other languages, as well as to extend and flesh out some of their key insights.

Following a brief introduction to hermeneutics, the bulk of the paper will explore ways that hermeneutics may supplement traditional scientific language and, in doing so, disclose unique aspects of community psychology practice. These aspects include tentativeness, concreteness, contextuality and collaborative, dialogic relationships. Examples will demonstrate how such a bolstered language would better match the reality of what practitioners actually do as “scientists in the swamp.” Following summary comments on the consequences of hermeneutics for scientific rigor and identity, a more extensive illustration will be developed around the study of collaborative settings.

**HERMENEUTIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LANGUAGE OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY**

Hermeneutics has been defined as the “art, theory, and philosophy of interpreting the meaning of an object (a text, a work of art, social action, the utterances of another speaker, etc.)” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 115). Simply put, hermeneutics explores the importance of interpretation (a term distinct from both “construction” and “production”—i.e. “knowledge production”). The consequences of a hermeneutic portrayal have been increasingly explored in a variety of fields including clinical assessment (Jones & Thorne, 1987), psychotherapy (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999), nursing (Benner, 1994), clinical medicine (Hazzard, 2000), education (McEwan, 1995), evaluation practice (Moss, 1994; Schwandt, 2002) and policy analysis (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003). Others have explored implications of hermeneutics for the general discipline of psychology (Martin & Thompson, 1997; Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Richardson et al., 1999). Philosophical hermeneutics, the specific tradition cited in this paper, hearkens to the work of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who drew largely on Aristotle’s theory of practical knowledge and Martin Heidegger’s rejection of the subject–object distinction (Schwandt, 2001, p. 193). In contrast to increasing attention to social constructionism within community psychology, searches of major journals reveal no formal attention to this particular tradition of hermeneutics.

One particular virtue of the hermeneutic tradition is to provide an especially sharp contrast to traditional scientific language, in effect “teasing out” subtle assumptions of classic science often implicit in practice. Since academic practice is oriented towards knowledge, it is convenient to focus, in particular, on the comparison of hermeneutic and traditional scientific knowledge. Valid knowledge—especially scientific knowledge—is often taken for granted to be of one form: comprehensible, abstract, generalizable and instrumental (means to an end). These qualities are typically thought to be the way of defining knowledge rather than a way. Through comparison with a viable alternative, however, the status of these qualities as assumptions becomes salient (Slife & Williams, 1995). Towards this end, an adaptation of Slife’s (2003a) recent comparison of hermeneutic and classic scientific models of truth will be drawn on. In contrast to qualities of traditional knowledge, hermeneutics portrays knowledge as irreducible, concrete, contextual and dialogic. In what follows, each attribute will be explored alongside the comparable attribute of classic knowledge, all in light of community psychology practice. In doing so, the intention is not to posit an either-or dichotomy between knowledge types or to propose one form as categorically superior. Instead, hermeneutic contributions may be seen as supplemental to current depictions of practice. This bolstered language, in turn, may constitute a better match of what actually takes place in community psychology practice—swampy or otherwise. Given space constraints, some issues will necessarily be underdeveloped or untouched, including details of hermeneutics’ distinctions from other postmodern philosophies, as well as particular issues in its interface with traditional science.

**Comprehensibility Versus Irreducibility: Defining the Limits of Cognitive Mastery**

Widely appreciated in community psychology is the spontaneity and “messiness” of its practice. By virtue of simply accepting community members as collaborators in research or intervention, for
example, influences as diverse as the people who embody them are introduced. In spite of this, community practice has typically been articulated in a language of traditional science that assumes valid knowledge to be comprehensible (Slife, 2003a). Comprehensibility is the assumption that knowledge, by definition, yields itself to intellectual mastery in the form of propositions, rules, laws or principles (Taylor, 2002). Prevention science, for instance, typically employs a language of precise outcomes, pathways, determinants, factors and mechanisms. Grant applications and publication outlets similarly expect program and research protocols to be articulated in definite, explicit terms. While these crisp articulations of knowledge can clearly be useful, they are sometimes presumed to be the only knowledge form relevant to science. After all, how are problems to be solved if they are not fully comprehended?

A primary problem with this portrayal is that it doesn’t easily map on to common human experience, let alone to community psychology practice. Taylor (2002) notes that in contrast to a study of the natural world—rocks, atoms, etc.—a study of the social world differs fundamentally because human beings “talk back.” Since humans can always surprise and choose otherwise than expected, it becomes literally impossible to predict with certainty the best course to follow in community research or action. In reinforcing the unfolding nature of community work, this insight highlights the fact that community practitioners are, indeed, required to intervene in problems they do not fully comprehend. While recognized in the field at a general level, this “messy” aspect of practice is not easily translated into classic scientific terminology. In an introductory article to a recent special issue on the “Process of Community Action and Research,” Primavera and Brodsky (2004) elaborate on this point. Speaking of simplified research descriptions in journal articles, they note:

Unfortunately, these abbreviated factual accounts of what was done and what was found often fail to reflect the very thing that defines us as a field. That is, our work takes place in real communities populated by real people living real lives. Working in the real world is messy, yet when we read our journals everything seems so easy, so uncomplicated and so predictable—akin to a “one size fits all” model of research and action. If we did not know any better, we might be left wondering why the reality of our own research and action . . . is so different from the published work of our peers. (p. 177).

This special issue goes on to review ways to characterize good community work using a richer and fuller language of practice. Given all the foregoing, there seems to be a clear need for alternatives to traditional portrayals of practice.

Irreducibility is the hermeneutic assumption that valid knowledge cannot always be “boiled down” or reduced into definitive propositions amenable to cognitive mastery (Slife, 2003a). Rather than being condensed into explicit form, “tacit” knowledge (Polanyi, 1964) remains unarticulated and implicit in the background of raw experience. This tacit knowledge manifests in situations where we “know more than we can tell.” Although we may recognize one face among many, for example, it is difficult to say just how we can do so (Polanyi, 1964, p. x). In their narration of community work in Western Australia, Bishop, Sonn, Drew, and Contos (2002) highlight the importance of irreducible, tacit knowledge in mediating a conflict between professional bureaucrats and rural community members. They concluded that the inattention of professionals to the “unexplicated” knowledge and “deep structure” of residents was a primary barrier in resolving the problem (p. 498).

Even so, acknowledging the existence of tacit knowledge is quite different than seeing its relevance to scientific practice. Polkinghorne (2000) recently addressed this question in the context of clinical psychology, where empirically supported treatment (EST) is currently considered the cutting-edge of science. Polkinghorne notes that underlying this EST movement is an epistemic model of “general knowledge applied to specific situations.” He critiques this model as a “distorted understanding of practice” that “misdescribes the way practitioners actually work” (p. 454) and goes on to describe everyday professional practice as occurring without explicit reliance on conscious deliberation or empirical findings. Instead, practitioners depend largely on internalized and culturally provided “background knowledge” to guide their work. Polkinghorne points to Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Dewey’s pragmatism as alternative languages that are attuned to this implicit knowledge. Dewey described tacit knowledge as knowing-how that “lives in the muscles” in contrast to knowing-that or knowing-why that “lives in the consciousness.” One may, for example, know how to work a door handle without consciously grasping why the handle causes the door to open (cited in Polkinghorne, 2000, pp. 457–458, 463). This kind of knowledge is gained by living a certain way or
undergoing a particular experience, rather than by intellectual analysis or reflection alone.

What would it mean for community psychology to make more explicit, the operation of implicit knowledge in its practice? Doing so, for one, would better legitimize the unfolding, tentative aspect of community work. For example, participant action research may be articulated in ways that highlight its fluid and emergent nature—unique among inquiry strategies; this may be done in place of rough characterizations of PAR in the methodological prose of traditional science. Dokecki (1996) has proposed a similar kind of language for "reflective-generative practice," expressing both fluidity and a central rationality in professional practice. He likens this fusion to jazz performance—spontaneous, yet harmonious and coherent. By formally labeling this trial-and-error aspect of practice, implicit knowledge may be redefined as a valid part of community practice, rather than as an aberration awaiting translation into scientific terminology. Instead of evidence for an "immature science," acknowledgment of tacit knowledge may be understood as reflecting a science mature enough to formally acknowledge the tacit, unfolding nature of its work.

Abstractness Versus Concreteness: Revisiting the Theory-Practice Gap

Attention to concrete particulars is another unique characteristic of community psychology, with immersion in actual settings esteemed in both research and intervention practice. This commitment to the concrete can be constrained, however, by a language of traditional science that assumes knowledge to be abstract or separable from the physical world (see Montero, 2002). Mathematics, for instance, has been historically embraced as the language of science for its seeming ability to rise above the messiness of experience. Scientific theory has been similarly understood to "overarch" experience to explain that experience (Slife, 2003a). While clearly, it is often useful to speak of abstract principles and models, limitations of such language have been increasingly evident. In particular, difficulty persists in understanding how to translate this knowledge into actual practice. Struggles continue, for instance, in how to assure fidelity in the dissemination of empirically derived protocols (Hazel & Onaga, 2003). This theory-practice (or research-practice) gap is often characterized as a problem inherent in practice—an inevitable challenge that must be faced in the applied sciences. Recent discussions of this gap, however, link its persistence to faulty epistemological assumptions including the "linear progression from basic to applied knowledge" (Price & Behrens, 2003) and the assumed "trickle down" process of transferring general knowledge to specific practice (Wandersman, 2003). Such comments suggest the gap may be understood not as simply inherent in practice, but as primarily inherent in language—even a language that assumes knowledge to be separable from practice itself.

Concreteness, in contrast, is the hermeneutic assumption that knowledge is inseparable or "fused" with the world as one experiences it. From this view, knowledge and practice cannot be neatly separated into different spheres of existence. As McEwan (1995) explains, "practices are never devoid of some level of theoretical or pre-theoretical understanding ... the very language in which the practice is made intelligible to ourselves and others is constitutive of the practice. To engage in a practice therefore is, to some extent, to be able to speak the language of the practice" (p. 178). All practice, from this perspective, is "pre-theorized" and shot through with assumptions, an idea consistent with notions of "praxis" as the union of practice and theory (Montero, 2002).

This shift can prompt radical changes in how to think of theory in practice. Most immediately, the permanence of the perceived theory-practice (research-practice) gap is challenged as partially an artifact of abstract knowledge. That is, the apparent need to "bring together" theory and practice depends on understanding theory and practice to be separable entities in the first place. If, instead, theory is understood to be already housed in practice, then theoretical work may be seen as a practical matter in itself. Elias (1994) for instance, speaks of "praxis explication" as an uncovering or disclosing of "theory in use" by actual practitioners (p. 303). This implies a "thick" inquiry (Geertz, 1973) into practice sufficient to gain awareness of how different assumptions constrain or facilitate that practice (e.g. Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Dokecki, 1996; Slife & Williams, 1995). This essentially challenges investigation to proceed at a deeper level—moving beyond examination of "what happens" to "how we think about what happens." In this way, basic fundamental issues in interpretation may be explored. Sometimes these interpretations will need to be surfaced and made available for open deliberation and examination. For instance, researchers may articulate the assumptions
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underlying a public education system and illustrate their operation to the public through case study vignettes. As a result, community deliberation may be facilitated as to whether the current “theory in use” underlying the system is adequate to meet problems at hand. In turn, other interpretations may be proposed and illustrated—alternatives that offer to facilitate an improved educational practice. Mitroff (1983) argued this kind of theoretical work was especially justified given the “ill-structured” nature of community problems where “different competent and well-intentioned observers can legitimately disagree as to the nature of the questions and not merely their ‘answers’” (p. 166).

In all these ways, theoretical work may be re-fashioned as an intensely practical activity—with concrete, real-world consequences hinging on basic distinctions between interpretations and narratives (Rappaport, 1998). This kind of theoretical work may be referred to as “practical philosophy” or perhaps be considered a legitimate kind of research in its own right. Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002), for example, recently called on the field to recognize the “intrinsically empirical dimension” of values and concepts as legitimate topics of systematic research (pp. 476, 486–487). They illustrate their proposal through their own excellent, in-depth examination of the practical consequences of three diverging perspectives on social justice. Flyvbjerg (2001) issued a similar proposal in his book Making Social Science Matter. In order to make more of a real impact on the world, Flyvbjerg argued, inquiry needs to focus on what he calls “value-rational” questions: “Where are we going? Who wins and who loses—and by what mechanisms of power? Is this desirable? What should we do?” (p. 60). By magnifying attention to such questions in its practice, community psychology may contribute more significantly to a gradual “transformation of social reality” (Montero, 2002).

Contextlessness Versus Contextuality: The Search for Contextual Knowledge

Contextuality is the assumption that knowledge resides in particular settings and need not necessarily generalize to all contexts. It does not follow that knowledge will not generalize to other settings, but that such generalization is not necessary for knowledge to be legitimate (Slife, 2003a). The importance of context, of course, is hardly a novel idea to community psychology; it is arguably the dominant in-sight of the field. Yet achieving a truly “contextual knowledge” has remained a curious challenge—reflected in a sense of “partial paradigm acquisition” in the field in relation to contextual issues (Trickett, 1996, p. 528).

A primary reason for this difficulty may be the assumption in classic science that knowledge is, by nature, applicable across settings. Valid knowledge has been traditionally understood to exist in some degree above the constraints of any particular context—i.e., “contextlessness.” Professional codes of ethics, for instance, reflect an attempt to establish principles that apply across varying contexts. Theoretical propositions, models and factors are similarly fashioned to standardize across settings. Research in a particular neighborhood setting, for example, may document standard levels of context, consider varying models of general neighborhood dynamics and attempt to identify salient environmental factors that match other settings. This strategy, while doubtlessly intended to heighten sensitivity to context, relies on a form of standardized knowledge that by definition transcends any one context. This creates an ironic contextless knowledge of context.

Attempts to contextualize knowledge have been myriad. Heidegger’s (1969) being-in-the-world, Altman and Rogoff’s (1984) transactional worldview and Shweder’s (1990) cultural psychology all reflect important advances in fusing knowledge of context to the actual context itself. In community psychology, there is increasing consensus that social constructionism represents an adequate contextualist epistemology (Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990; Montero, 2002). Constructionism asserts that knowledge is constructed or jointly produced through the discourse and action of diverse communities and ideologies. In its mild form, it resonates well with hermeneutics’ emphasis on language as partially constitutive of experience. In its strong form, however, constructionism rejects any consistent way to differentiate knowledge claims outside of one’s particular stance or social critique. Truth, from this perspective, is illusory. As Montero (2002) asserts, “the character of truth is the social accord bestowed to any statement accepted at a certain moment by a social group… the fleeting moment in which we find shared meaning for our life events… Thus, the question, “what is truth?” may be answered… everything may be true, and at the same time nothing may be so” (pp. 578–579). This strong-form constructionist position entails some obvious conflict with science. Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002) recently recognized
and addressed this conflict by calling on the field to embrace an epistemology that “acknowledges its own embeddedness in history and culture without thereby reducing all knowledge claims to the status of ideology... We point to a pressing need in community psychology for a theory of knowledge that avoids the untenable presumption of epistemological transcendence without thereby slipping into a completely self-nullifying radical relativism or merely ideological partisanship” (p. 473, 476).

In this same spirit, philosophical hermeneutics has been increasingly recognized among social scientists as a viable third alternative to constructivist and objectivist traditions—offering a “middle ground” articulation of contextual embeddedness that effectively avoids relativism (Martin & Thompson, 1997). This perspective ultimately leads to some major implications for investigations of context. Similar to constructionism, hermeneutics begins by recognizing the importance of personal background that comes “before the beginning” of any experience, actually making that new experience possible. This background is called by Gadamer (1989) the “horizon of experience” and represents the totality of language, values and assumptions—both explicit and tacit—that “forestructures” all experience. Unlike strong-form constructionism, however, hermeneutics does not claim this horizon “makes up” the world or “produces” our knowledge entirely (Taylor, 2002). Why is this? Since individuals exist “always already” within larger communities, knowledge is never cut “whole cloth” out of thin air (Rappaport, 1998). Instead, understanding always emerges through engagements with multiple surrounding horizons—including other people, other narratives and texts, and other contexts. For this reason, personal horizons have only partial creation power over a shared collective reality—an insight that begins to delineate a clear demarcation between philosophical hermeneutics and relativism.

At this point, arguably the most significant contribution of hermeneutics becomes evident. After identifying the existence of horizons, Gadamer (1989) fleshes out the nature of engagement between horizons—including, most importantly, critical conditions under which an engagements may lead to a genuine advance in understanding. He begins with a vital image of two horizons “put into play” in a particular engagement. His use of the word “play” here is deliberate—suggesting fluidity and an absence of perfect control characteristic of “losing oneself” in a game. This image suggests, first of all, a genuine openness to being taught within an engagement (Taylor, 2002). Rather than a glib sense of “openness to listening,” this is an openness going “all the way down”—even to the basic values and assumptions brought to an encounter. Taylor (2002) elaborates:

In coming to see the other correctly, we inescapably alter our understanding of ourselves... The crucial moment is the one in which we allow ourselves to be interpellated by the other; in which the difference [in perspectives] escapes from its categorization as an error, a fault, or a lesser, undeveloped version of what we are, and challenges us to see it as a viable human alternative... this is the stance Gadamer calls “openness” (pp. 140–141).

This is a notion familiar to feminist scholars, who have called for practice that “requires us, as researchers, to challenge our own view of the topic” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 762). Such openness also resonates with the disciplinary value of diversity. A potential litmus test of such openness is the nature of questions underlying a particular research effort. Specifically, is a question asked out of genuine anticipation of being taught something new or is it simply a rhetorical move functioning as part of a larger argument? If the former is true, at what level is the researcher open to being contradicted or surprised? It may be argued that at the heart of what it means to be a science is a willingness to be contradicted or proven wrong at even the most fundamental level. If so, such openness may be something not only to be maintained, but also to be pursued and nurtured in the research practice of the discipline.

If, on the other hand, underlying questions are disingenuous; if the investigation is only a front for argument, then, in hermeneutic terms, it becomes a pseudo-dialogue—with participants merely “engaging in a sham, designed to manipulate [one’s] partner while pretending to negotiate” (Taylor, 2002, p. 128). The ensuing inquiry would do nothing to external trappings of sincere investigation, while inwardly using the research to largely express pre-determined convictions. The danger of such a scenario echoes Jason’s (1991) warning against “remaining committed to a particular social action even when the data do not support that policy” (p. 15). Unmalleable positions—whether unseen or not—undercut both the credibility of science and the potential creativity of social action in the field. Attention to this critical issue may mean the difference between research that both embraces and examines ideology (putting
ideology into play) and research that is unilaterally driven by ideology.

Worth noting, at this point, is the fact that such openness does not preclude real conviction or even advocacy of one’s position. Explicit or not, one’s value stance is an inescapable part of one’s community work (Jason, 1991). What’s more, a particular value position may conceivably pass any and all tests of its merit and thus remain both unremittingly open and unshaken in its consistency. Herein lies the crucial hermeneutic middle ground in the standoff between relativism (value entrenchment) and objectivism (value detachment)—a place where appropriate conviction of current understandings is fused with a perpetual openness to being taught more.

In spite of the evident benefits of openness, there also exists a risk of being co-opted or manipulated in such an exchange. A second condition of hermeneutic dialogue, then, is some degree of trust between parties—a quality likewise emphasized by feminist philosophy. This condition suggests neither naïve faith in widespread good intention nor absolute confidence in conversation partners. Indeed, a community practice saturated with radically divergent perspectives would encourage maintaining an appropriate level of caution. A “healthy dose” of skepticism has always been an appreciated aspect of good science. This being said, when skepticism or caution calcifies into deep-set suspicion, it may systematically preclude opportunities to be taught at some level or on some issue. In such a case, the skepticism has arguably deteriorated from its original “healthy” contribution, to become a detrimental barrier to potentially transformative horizons—like an over-active immunity system that automatically fights off beneficial and harmful visitors alike. In this way, by refusing to revisit fundamental issues or “test” one’s horizon at some level, the capacity to improve one’s understanding may be seriously impeded. All these concerns underlie hermeneutics’ simple proposal that understanding best flourishes in deliberation that is primarily characterized by trust, rather than suspicion.

Where both trust and openness exist, however, any engagement—be that person to person, person to text, or person to context—can potentially become what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons.” The image conveys a genuine coming together—even a union—of two distinct entities. As with other cases of fusion, real power may flow from the engagement. In the case of human engagement, fusion is achieved where two horizons are genuinely “put into play” in free-flowing and open comparison, with power manifest in tacit assumptions that become surfaced and new alternatives never previously considered that are revealed to participants. In this way, participants gain the option of adopting new interpretations or revising previous interpretations towards a more adequate account of the situation at hand. This constitutes a second grounding against relativism, as well as demonstrating hermeneutics’ resonance with the basic scientific aspiration to seek truth. Implications for research in community psychology are significant.

First, whether or not a particular study leads to improved understanding would be proposed to depend less on technical issues of method, and more on the actual nature of the questions being asked in the investigations. To what extent, for example, do questions reflect a background horizon “put into play” in the research encounter, with a priori openness to being answered at any level—even in surprising ways? Or contrarily, to what extent might questions reflect simply an unquestioned ideology in pursuit of further documentation? Hermeneutic depictions of context would, first of all, encourage evaluating research at this level.

Secondly, by emphasizing the rich learning potential of any single encounter with a contrasting horizon, a clearer epistemological justification is offered for idiographic, narrative and case-based research. Although the field is clearly open to these methods in its practice, a perception still lingers that qualitative methods are merely preliminary to “real” scientific methods in the generation of trustworthy knowledge. In a recent AJCP issue dedicated to coalition work, for example, practitioners offered vivid, case-based narrations illustrating the potential of successful collaborative work in particular settings (Folayemi, 2001). Yet in the same issue, single-case studies were characterized as “anecdotal” and not seriously considered as evidence of coalition effectiveness (Berkowitz, 2001). Rather than reflecting ill will towards qualitative methods, however, such minimization may simply reflect unexamined assumptions in the discipline’s formal language of research practice—in particular, the assumption of valid knowledge as standardized. In response, hermeneutic depictions of context offer to expand portrayals of social science by disclosing the distinctive learning potential of any single context—and thus, of qualitative, small-N inquiry. In turn, by embracing such research as a legitimate complement to classic research, significant steps may be taken in the field towards a
genuinely pluralistic inquiry proposed as central to a “good science” of communities (Kelly, 2003).

**Instrument Versus Dialogue: Two Metaphors for Practice**

Another unique quality of community psychology practice is its enduring commitment to democratic and empowering ways of relating. While particularly emphasized by feminist scholars, these commitments are widespread in the field. In spite of this, actual on-the-ground practice remains criticized as overly unilateral and undemocratic (Bond, 1990; Wandersman, 2003). Kelly (2003), for instance, recently challenged community psychologists to be “less in control” in relating to citizens and “not the only source of influence” (p. 213). What underlies this persisting difficulty in living up to such deeply felt disciplinary values?

Once again, the field’s customary language of practice offers insight into the problem. Similar to other scientific fields, community psychology draws on an implicit metaphor of *instruments* in characterizing its practice. An instrument, by definition, is “something or somebody used as a means of achieving a desired result or accomplishing a particular purpose” (Microsoft Encarta Reference Library, 2003). Methods, for instance, are spoken of as being *used* to gain knowledge while tools and programs are similarly *used* to help a community. Community interventions, in particular, seem to be increasingly framed around tool production and the dissemination of programs and technology (Jason, 1991). In addition, knowledge itself becomes understood as a means to a separable end. Elias (1994) notes that this kind of language is attractive in its suggestion of easy implementation: “Once up and running, [a community program] should continue because the operations required to continue it are minimal, relatively automated, and relatively simple and easy to learn” (p. 296). To be sure, an instrumental focus can be beneficial, especially in helping frame complex activities in ways that feel “hands-on.”

On the other hand, a focus on instruments may also imply a degree of passivity in its target audience, since tools are created for predetermined purposes. For this reason, the use of tool-language or method-language can predispose a unilateral power disparity, with the person in control of the research or intervention instrument naturally seen as the one able to control the knowledge or change being targeted. Adding to the problem are technical descriptions of practice that, unless “dumbed-down,” are often inaccessible to normal community members. This ensuing inequality, to be clear, can occur regardless of intentions to the contrary. Even when a tool is employed collaboratively within a group, for example, it is still ultimately *used* by the group for some specified aim. All this would simply suggest that the field’s difficulty in living up to democratic values may stem, in part, from the subtle constraints of instrumental language in its practice. Simply put, it is difficult to achieve ideals of democratic research and intervention with instruments as the central metaphor for practice. Our language, in this sense, may betray us.

An alternative metaphor for social inquiry is basic human *dialogue*, an image popular in many philosophical traditions. By definition, dialogue is a bilateral exchange with active engagement from both participants. Aside from naturally reinforcing collaboration and genuine listening among parties, dialogue suggests a fundamental re-centering of practice in human relationships, rather than instruments (Taylor, 2002; Slife, 2003b). As a result, additional emphasis may be given to concepts such as role relations (Seidman, 1988), as well as entire accounts of psychology centered on human relationships (e.g. Dokecki, 1996; Hill et al., 2000; Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Gantt & Williams, 2002; Slife, 2003b). Relationship-centered language would seem to be potentially more accessible to normal people. For instance, participant action research could be described in simple language that highlights its basic attention to evolving experience and its commitments to collaborative learning and action. Such a portrayal would contrast with depictions of PAR as consisting of a series of complex steps, techniques and methodological considerations. A metaphor of dialogue, to be clear, would not discourage the use of such guidelines, but would restructure them as auxiliary to practice. Indeed, though potentially facilitated by methods and techniques, Gadamer (1989) proposes this basic capacity to engage and learn with another person as “built in” to normal human beings.

**Summary: Hermeneutic Knowing and Community Science**

In the final pages of a historical review of *SCRA*, Division 27, Meritt, Greene, Jopp, and Kelly (1999) write, “although progress is being made . . . SCRA has yet to fully realize the ideals established and sustained since the inception of the field . . .” (p. 91).
In the minds of some commentators, then, the goals of the field's formal language have yet to be fully embodied in its practice. One way to evaluate this "language–practice" gap would be to speak of flawed personal motivations—practitioners not caring enough about context or lacking sensitivity to issues of power imbalance, for example. Like similar polarized judgments, however, such an evaluation would place primary attention on individual deficits, while minimizing the significance of context—in this case, linguistic context. This paper has sought to address this context and explore an alternative way to assess the language–practice disparity. Namely, attention is directed to the tangible ways that the field's dominant language of practice has compelled practitioners to think of valuable knowledge as comprehensible, abstract, independent of context to some degree, and instrumental. Such assumptions, in turn, have naturally predisposed the field to focus on standardized models, generalized propositions and instruments presumably fundamental to both research (methodology) and action (technology/tools). In this way, community practice has been constrained "before the beginning" in reaching some of its unique ideals.

Given this, hermeneutics has been explored throughout the paper as an expanded linguistic context in which to frame community psychology practice. This language has been proposed as both a contrast and a complement to the traditional portrayal of science. Four characteristics of hermeneutic knowledge have been explored—irreducibility, concreteness, contextuality, and a dialogic structure. These alternate attributes help articulate a practice more attuned to implicit knowledge and the power of language distinctions, more attentive to insights gained from particular settings, and more cognizant of basic human relationships lying at the heart of both community intervention and research.

On this note, an important clarification is that a hermeneutic contribution to a language of research practice can extend the fundamental project of a community science, rather than dilute its aim. To wit, William James (1912) described what he called "radical empiricism" as follows: "to be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced." Given this statement, one might ask: Are tacit assurances directly experienced? Are values and ethical commitments directly experienced? Are the consequences of competing language distinctions and narratives directly experienced? If we concede with Slipe (2001) that "the hallmark of science is investigation and examination, in all its forms" (p. 45), then increasing the scope of direct experiences accepted as legitimate in the field's collective inquiry should only strengthen scientific muscles. Specifically, this would effectively expand empirical attention beyond the "brute, objective" world to an exploration of the language, values and assumptions that undergird the experiencing of this world. A concluding example illustrates these complementary research approaches on a particular issue—the study of collaborative community settings.

Nationally, community collaboration continues to receive increased attention as a vehicle facilitating community change (Allen, Watt, & Hess, 2003; Berkowitz, 2001). A traditional investigatory approach begins with identifying underlying factors and variables distinguishing effective coalitions from those less so. For instance, based on a review of the research literature, Mattessich and Monsey (1992) identify 19 key factors or ingredients that "make collaboration work." These explicit factors are abstracted from across the practice of many collaborative bodies and clustered into six categories: environment, membership, process/structure, communications, purpose and resources. Environment factors leading to successful collaboration include (a) a history of collaboration or cooperation in the community (b) the collaborative group seen as a leader in the community and (c) a favorable political/social climate. Other key factors include "collective vision" or "quality of leadership." Combined, these factors produce a model of contributing factors proposed to reflect, as a whole, the functioning of effective coalitions across settings. The primary concern of this research approach is less the effectiveness of any one collaborative setting and more, the overall effectiveness of "collaboration" in general (Berkowitz, 2001). The ensuing model is communicated as a "theoretical basis" for those interested in pursuing collaboration by providing a vision of ideal practice. Consequently, successful collaboration may be achieved by orchestrating the confluence of the factors delineated in the model. In turn, tools such as a manual of step-by-step information are developed to be disseminated and applied in improving the work of actual coalitions.

As both a contrast and complement to this approach, hermeneutic inquiry leverages and extends its empirical scope. It begins with attention to the details of experience in particular collaborative settings. This implies less focus on
evaluating "collaboration" in general and more in understanding particular collaborative events. These settings are understood as ever-evolving—even "moving targets" that must be approached and studied as phenomena in constant flux (Schwandt, 2002). This would suggest research strategies with corresponding fluidity. Inquiry consequently unfolds over time as a function of the participation, dialogue and engagement within the group. More specifically, research would attend to both "what happens" (explicit knowledge) and "how we think and talk about what happens" (implicit knowledge). Exploration of these tacit, unarticulated aspects may be facilitated by documenting the discourse, narratives and history of a group. In this way, research may lead to understanding how the same instance of collaborative engagement can be interpreted in varying ways by different stakeholders, as well as the consequences of these diverse interpretations for constraining or facilitating the particular collaborative event. What role do participants assume the coalition and its practice has in the larger community? How do commitments and values brought to the collaboration vary across stakeholders? What assumptions or values are implicitly accepted in the group as good or bad? By surfacing these assumptions, they may be articulated and examined more systematically. In turn, the influence of these assumptions on the actual experience of collaborative practice may be explored explicitly among group members.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to bring contributions of philosophical hermeneutics to bear on the language of community psychology practice. As a newcomer to the field, I entered a clinical-community program 3 years ago intent on becoming a therapist. In one semester, I was swept off my feet by a fresh way of framing psychology that hearkens to a 1965 conference nicknamed "the Swamp" (Revenson et al., 2002, p. 7). During my own "rookie seasons" in the field, I have come to believe that community psychology has authentic potential to impact the world. Alongside this optimism, however, I have wrestled to understand why the language of classic science felt so limiting to disclose what attracted me to the field. Within this particular tradition of hermeneutics, in contrast, I have found ideas that help make sense of "swampy" dimensions of practice that are distinctive, yet often portrayed as aberrations of official scientific practice—i.e. fluidity, exploration of alternatives, optimism, passion, openness, collaboration, and relationships. Specifically, a language of practice expanded in the direction of tacitness, concreteness, contextuality and dialogue, arguably offers tangible ways to articulate these unique aspects as central to our practice, rather than peripheral. Instead of calling for major changes in the way we practice, however, such a diversified language may simply be a better "fit" of what we already do in practice. In addition, given the implicit defense of a concrete, contextual truth in hermeneutics (Slife, 2003a), I have come to understand its contributions as supplementing, rather than displacing the basic scientific project of seeking a more truthful understanding of experience. In this way, incorporating hermeneutics into formal frameworks of practice may actually embolden our empirical reach. In the end, far from reflecting an immature science "not to be taken seriously," wrestles with disciplinary identity may actually be solid evidence of a social science mature enough to be interrogating its deepest foundations—even its assumptions of what it means to be a science after all.

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