



Is Community Psychology “Forever Young”? Noting and Addressing the Lack of Community Psychologists in Communities of Aging



Figure 1 Photograph by agilemktg1. Public Domain.

Between the years 2005 to 2050, the global population of older persons (over age 65) is expected to increase 113%. In continents such as Asia and Africa, the increase is expected to exceed 268% and 307%, respectively. Considering women constitute a majority of the aging population, they may be at an even greater disadvantage than men.

“Community psychology can have a role in producing the conceptual shifts needed to change societal attitudes now dominated by negative age stereotypes.”

Discrimination and lack of social support is particularly common among older adults. As the population ages and retires from paid work, many countries, including the United States, will have to make policy changes to ensure economic stability. Older adults are more likely to require government aid, such as health care assistance, that may not already be in place.

Highlights

Older adults face unique challenges in developing and maintaining a sense of community in the latter parts of their lifespan.

There are few community psychologists involved with aging issues proportional to their population.

We need a call to action in our field for community work with the aged and elderly.

As people age, their needs change and support systems, such as long-term care, housing, and healthcare are often not fully maximized to address their needs. Older adults face the challenge of maintaining autonomy in a society that insists they retire and rest. Encouraging older adults to stay active not only benefits their well-being, but also contributes to the greater society.

With an emphasis on developing and sustaining a sense of community,

“Older adults face the challenge of maintaining autonomy in a society that insists they retire and rest.”

community psychologists are poised to help create productive communities that include the aged, as well as counteract negative stereotypes of aging.

There are some noteworthy community psychologists who are addressing the problems of the aged. Some in our field are involved in community building and advocacy, while others focus on strengthening community institutions that can provide support to older adults. Community psychologists are finding creative ways of using seniors as community volunteers and service providers, and a few community psychologists are working with policymakers to improve the lives of older people, whether residing in the community or nursing homes.

Unfortunately though, this is a very small group, particularly relative to the growing population of older adults. How can we attract more community psychologists to the field of aging? What can we do to encourage interest in this field? As our global population is aging rapidly and will continue to age exponentially in the near future, a call to action is required to spur the societal changes necessary to support the aging population.

Methods

Authors performed a keyword search using terms such as “elderly,” “older adults,” and “aging” in several of community psychology’s major journals, such as the American Journal of Community Psychology, the Journal of Community Psychology, the Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, and the Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?

A large portion of older adults are women and the same patriarchal norms which afflict younger adults (such as the wage gap) have lasting impacts into older adulthood (pensions based on earnings).

Understanding how the human psyche is affected by the loss of civic engagement and discrimination is important to comprehend the full scale of how the older population is influenced by society.

There are different cultural models of understanding aging and valuing the aged. These influence how older people are treated. In communities where older people are revered, they may have access to more resources and help.

Results

- Most of the aging population consists of women who are already disenfranchised. Without support, this marginalization is likely to continue.
- Older adults are often discouraged from civic participation due to stereotypes and discrimination.
- There is an increasing need for communities of the aged that are not limited to nursing homes and institutions.
- Even though community psychologists are fully equipped to improve the social landscape older adults endure, very few are invested because new policies must be integrated and compatible with existing policies. Changing attitudes to reverse discrimination against aging takes time.
- The goals and strategies of the UN Program on Aging are consistent with community psychology principles and could be utilized to encourage new community psychologists to the field as well as provide more direction on priorities for the aging.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation—Since the aging population is growing rapidly, more research should be conducted on improving the lives of the aged. One of the most significant problems is long-term care and redesigning support systems. One of the most common forms of long-term care in developed countries is the nursing home, but this may not be the best option for all older adults; research can be used to discover better alternatives. In addition, older adults in developing countries may not have any form of healthcare, housing, or support, especially if their families are not involved in their lives. Research should be conducted on how to increase the accessibility of these vital support systems for older people in developing communities.

Social Action—For community psychologists, the conclusions should spur action in improving the lives of older adults. These improvements can be achieved through empowerment, public education, and policy or legislative changes. For the general population, the conclusions should be eye-opening to how the global population will be changing in the near future.

Summary and Discussion by Elizabeth Kirkwood based on Cheng, S.-T., & Heller, K. (2009). Global Aging: Challenges for Community Psychology. American Journal of Community Psychology, 44(1-2), 161–173.

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