

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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Working to Reduce Alcohol-Related Health Risks and Increase Residents'

Quality of Life in Milan

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There are a number of risks associated with alcohol consumption among young adults, thereby presenting an important issue to tackle in community psychology. Since 1995, more than 100 articles have been published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* and *Journal of Community Psychology* addressing alcohol-related issues among youth and their communities. Expanding how community psychology frames this issue in an international context is highly relevant to practitioners and the field.

For several years, Giovanni Aresi (a doctoral student at the Catholic University of Milan) has been working to design prevention and intervention programs to address young adults' alcohol abuse. Currently, he is involved in a project aimed at mobilizing stakeholders and community members in designing and implementing interventions to reduce young adults' alcohol-related health risks and promote residents' quality of life in the Ticinese nightlife entertainment district in Milan. Aresi serves as the principal investigator of the project, which includes a team of undergraduate psychology students under the guidance of Dr. Elena Marta (Social and Community Psychology full professor at Catholic University of Milan) and Dr. David Chavis (University of Maryland Baltimore County and Community Science CEO).

Since inception, the project has used a multi-phase mixed methods design to engage stakeholders and community members. For example, Aresi used interviews with residents to help cultivate relationships. The project then engaged a team of stakeholders (i.e., members of health service organizations, nightlife prevention professionals, bar and club managers, and neighborhood association representatives) to conduct a context analysis, which served as a critical step in identifying the most relevant alcohol-related risks and consequences at the local level. Surveys were also administered to more than 340 residents to obtain perceptions of the district and young adults. A preliminary report was developed and shared with stakeholders through focus groups.

Preliminary findings include:

- **Belongingness depends upon the dominant activity in the setting.** Stakeholders indicated that there is an active community during the day but a loss of a sense of belongingness at night when young people spend time in bars or in the streets.
- **Residents and media have different views of the setting [or district].** Although many residents perceived their district as a ‘dirty environment’ they did not perceive it as ‘noisy’ and ‘unsafe.’ These perceptions contradict descriptions of the district by local media.
- **Different subgroups within the setting stereotype each other.** Quotes were shared in the report from residents and young nightlife goers and reinforced stereotypes each group had about each other. The team then engaged members in a discussion on how these stereotypes impact relationships among residents in the district.

Some implications for community practice include:

- **The use of *Social Reconnaissance*** (SR; Martini & Torti, 2003): Used in community practice and organizing in Italy, SR engages stakeholders and community members in assessing readiness for change and creating a needs assessment. Analysis and interpretation of data is guided from the perspective of stakeholders through interviews, focus groups, and group meetings to promote coalition building.

- **Use of Multi-Methods:** The integration of interviews and focus groups with quantitative data collection (household surveys to over 340 residents) provide multiple perspectives of the phenomena and are highly important in triangulating findings to support valid and useful results.
- **Use of *Community-Based Participatory Research*.** Community members are active participants throughout the research phase (from the definition of the measures of the surveys to the participation in the interpretation of results). More importantly, as active participants in the research process the stakeholders are valued and integral in shaping deliberate action or developing solutions to the problem.

Collectively, this project builds on community strengths and assets and takes into account the specific social, cultural and geographical context of the district. There are challenges though, which include trying to address when to present the results to the community (whether to present rough data or more defined results) and what level of complexity non-academics can comprehend with or without training. Regardless of challenges, the team is bringing stakeholders and researchers together to move towards social action.

Work Cited:

Martini, E. & Torti, A. (2003), *Fare lavoro di comunità: riferimenti teorici e strumenti operativi*. [Working with communities: theoretical perspectives and operative tools] Roma Carocci editore.

Related Journals:

American Journal of Community Psychology (2013) Volume 51

Journal of Community Psychology (1999; 2013) Volume 27; Volumes 41

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.