

# **THEory into ACTION**

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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Community Redevelopment in Rural Georgia

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One of the many unique features of the field of Community Psychology is the potential for the application of core concepts and theories across multiple and diverse communities. While local contexts may vary greatly from one community to another, tools within the field allow researchers and practitioners to seek out ways to improve the well-being of inhabitants within settings.

The city of Rome is located in rural northwest Georgia. Within Rome is the community of South Rome. This community of just under 5,000 people has higher rates of poverty than the city of Rome and county as a whole and exhibits signs of decline, such as poorly maintained and underdeveloped lots and an infrastructure that has fallen into disrepair. This also happens to be the hometown of Ashley Anglin, PhD, a May 2014 graduate of the Community and Cultural Psychology doctoral program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, who had previously done community development work in a place that is different than Rome, Georgia in a number of ways: Costa Rica. This prior work involved exploring youth perceptions of tourism, and when developing her dissertation, she planned to explore community development more broadly using the Community Capitals Framework, which describes the interactions between different parts of a community and consists of seven dimensions of capital—cultural, social, financial, built, natural, human, and political (Flora, Emery, Fey, & Bregendahl, 2005). The goal of using this

framework is to get community residents and redevelopment stakeholders to think holistically about all their community has to offer and to engage residents in planning for the future. When integrated into mixed-methods research, this framework aids in the development of sustainable strategies to improve community well-being by identifying resources present within communities, which can then be invested to create new resources that meet community members goals for the future (Flora, Emery, Fey, & Bregendahl, 2005).

Community stakeholders in South Rome discovered the work Ashley planned to do in Costa Rica and were intrigued and eager to see if similar work could be done in their own community. She decided to apply her expertise to improve her hometown, applying all four of the guiding principles of the field of Community Psychology to bring about positive change: Explicit attention and respect for diversity among peoples and settings, understanding people within their contexts, implementing change strategies at multiple levels of analysis, and engaging in active collaboration with community members and other stakeholders. This work has deliberately sought to engage community members who are diverse across a number of key characteristics. Those involved in this work have also focused on the local context by making concentrated efforts to discover the complex roots of recent problems within the community.

Community redevelopment work in South Rome has sought to target multiple ecological levels to promote well-being. This work targets individuals through the Early Learning Center, Adult Education Center, and Urban Teachers Program; families through parenting classes; and the community as a whole through collaborative planning for infrastructure improvements and creating contexts where community members can convene and engage one another.

Finally, this work has been an active collaboration. The project is community-led and has involved numerous local organizations. The principal organization is the South Rome Redevelopment Corporation (SRRC), which oversees the implementation of the South Rome Redevelopment Master Plan by working with local government, county government, and non-profit and for-profit organizations. The larger South Rome Redevelopment Coalition consists of numerous local stakeholders, including two local colleges, Rome City Schools, the South Rome Boys and Girls Club, and several local churches. Numerous other organizations are also part of this collaboration as funders – including the Society for Community Research and Action, through its Mini-Grant Program. What has made this collaboration unique and thriving is the passion and dedication of its members and their strong interpersonal relationships, as well as tremendous leadership, especially from a dean at a local college. Ashley plays an important role, bringing her expertise as a community researcher and program evaluator to this active collaboration, but ultimately it is community-led. One of the positive outcomes thus far is the generation of a pro-change community culture, which is vital to the overall success of this redevelopment project. Other positive outcomes include the large amount of baseline data that this planning process has generated about strengths and aspirations of the community (which will inform ongoing program and project evaluation), the new connections that have been created among individuals and community organizations, and the list of concrete next-steps that were created using community members' dreams and ideas.

This work has not been without difficulties. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this work has been making sure that all interested parties are invited to participate and then keeping them at the table once they have joined the redevelopment process. However, these challenges have been overcome by disseminating information about this work in the community at every

opportunity, as well as by developing and maintaining strong relationships among the diverse stakeholders involved in the redevelopment of South Rome. Being conscientious of the needs and constraints of those involved has also helped to keep individuals at the table, and an important part of this is making sure not to demand from these individuals more than they can realistically contribute to the redevelopment effort. Finally, the application of the Community Capitals Framework has provided a theoretical basis by which those involved in this work can think holistically about who should be invited to join in the redevelopment work.

Community redevelopment in South Rome is ongoing; however, there have been success stories already. Recently, over 100 community members attended a voluntary community meeting to discuss plans for new housing developments. Many of those in attendance engaged with coalition members and decided to become involved in the work themselves – further expanding and strengthening this community-led effort by creating a pro-change community culture.

## References

Flora, C., Emery, M., Fey, S., & Bregendahl, C. (2005). Community capitals: A tool for

Evaluating strategic interventions and projects. Available from

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(accessed April 28, 2014).

*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*

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