

Teaching Community Psychology through Documentary Film: Some Practical Ideas and Film Recommendations

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Courses in community psychology introduce complex concepts and issues that can be elusive to our students. While our discipline has a number of excellent textbooks and a rich and varied literature to draw upon, it is often difficult for students to appreciate and fully understand the nuanced complexities of community psychology principles such as empowerment and practices such as community organizing. For some students, limited exposure to sociocultural and socioeconomic diversity may further interfere with their ability to fully appreciate and comprehend some material. Documentary films can serve as powerful tools for teaching community psychology. They offer us, albeit for a brief time, the opportunity to become immersed in a community, to see how people live their lives, and to bear witness to the challenges they face. Furthermore, documentary films provide excellent illustrations of the trials, tribulations, and triumphs experienced by people working to create meaningful, sustainable change within their communities. The past decade has seen a dramatic rise in the production of documentary films, many of which contain subject matter relevant to the teaching of community psychology.

Where to Find Films

Most faculty will find documentary films are readily accessible through large university and public library systems and inter-library loan. Netflix, the online movie rental site, now maintains a sizable library of documentary films and many of them are available to view online at no extra charge to members. Amazon.com has a substantial collection of documentary films available for purchase. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) now produces five documentary film series exploring the human condition including: American Experience (a history series that features people and events that shaped U.S. History, past and present), *FRONTLINE* (public affairs films exploring critical issues of our times), *Independent Lens* and *P.O.V* (both featuring independent films), and *Wide Angle* (international current affairs). Many of the films in these series are available for viewing online and videos are available for purchase through www.shoppbs.com. Cable channels, HBO and Cinemax, both produce critically acclaimed and award-winning documentary series. In addition, several documentary film distributors have excellent collections of award-winning films relevant to community psychology subject matter: Docurama (www.docurama.com); New Day Films (www.newday.com); and Bullfrog Films (www.bullfrogfilms.com).

Three Film Recommendations

Below is a sampling of some of the most inspiring films that I have used in community psychology courses. These films consistently garner positive feedback from students and serve as the springboard for endless hours of discussion and debate both in class and beyond. They provide excellent examples of community psychology concepts and practices, and illustrate the

impact that successful community initiatives and interventions can have on individuals and communities as a whole.

The New Heroes: Their Bottom Line is Lives (2005, 4 – 1 hour programs)

This four-hour series, hosted by Robert Redford, originally aired on PBS stations in 2005. It features the stories of 14 social entrepreneurs from around the world, working to enhance the quality of life of poor and marginalized people through education, employment, health care and violence reduction. What makes their stories so compelling are the innovative ways in which they tackle the problems found in the communities they serve.

The first hour, *Dreams of Sanctuary*, features social entrepreneurs working to provide shelter and support to some of the world's most dispossessed individuals. Segments in this hour include: Moses Zulu's school and home for children orphaned by AIDS in Zambia; Mimi Silbert's work with individuals who are homeless, addicted to drugs, or former convicts through the San Francisco-based Delancey Street Foundation; and Kailash Satyarthi's efforts to eradicate slavery in India through the creation of child-friendly villages and the sale of a line of carpets made without forced labor.

The second hour, *Technology of Freedom*, features "compassionate capitalists" who have created businesses to maximize human benefit rather than profits. Segments in this hour include: Martin Fisher and Nick Moon who invented an economical water pump to support subsistence farmers in Africa; Fabio Rosa, a Brazilian cowboy who takes on government monopolies to bring electricity to rural areas of Brazil; and Govindapa Vin Kataswami (Dr. V.) who along with his partner David Green are using industrial techniques to bring sight-saving surgery to India's poor.

The third hour, *Power of Enterprise*, features social entrepreneurs working to alleviate poverty by creating innovative economic and employment opportunities. This episode spotlights: Muhammad Yunus ("the banker to the poor") whose Grameen Bank has provided 4.7 billion dollars in loans to 4.4 million families in Bangladesh; Albina Ruiz Rios who helps residents of the jungle city of Pucallpa, Peru to create small businesses that clean up the garbage contaminating the ground water and causing disease in poor neighborhoods; and Maria Teresa Leal, who runs the Coopa-Roca sewing cooperative, a fair labor shop, in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, that creates high-fashion clothes seen on runways around the world.

The final hour, *Power of Knowledge*, chronicles efforts to educate children who have been denied education and left to their own devices. Segments in this hour features: Sompop Jantraka who runs a school for young girls in Thailand in an effort to save them from being sold into prostitution; Dina Abdel Wahab who runs schools across Egypt for children with disabilities for whom there are no educational opportunities; and Inderjit Khurana who runs schools on the platforms of train stations in Calcutta, serving children who beg in order to survive.

Each segment provides unique insights into the living conditions of the world's dispossessed and innovative programs to address their plight. Visit <http://www.pbs.org/opb/thenewheroes/about> for information on how to obtain this film.

Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street (60 minutes)

This inspiring film chronicles the decade-long struggle of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) and community members of the Roxbury section of Boston to transform their neighborhood from one of vacant lots used for illegal dumping, red-lining by banks, and misguided city planning. Through retrospective interviews with community residents, activists, organizers, and city officials, the film highlights the grassroots community organizing efforts of this multi-ethnic (African-American, Latino, Cape Verdean, and European-American), low income community. The efforts of community residents include organizing against illegal dumping, clearing a neighborhood park of drug dealing, and supporting youth in the community by involving them in the design of a community center. The most daunting effort taken on by DSNI was the fight against City Hall for greater control over vacant land in the community. Through their efforts DSNI became the only community group in the nation to win eminent domain power over vacant land in their community, paving the way for the development of high quality, affordable housing in the neighborhood.

The film provides outstanding examples community organizing, coalition-building, and strategies for multi-ethnic and multi-generational inclusion. This film is a powerful exemplar of community and individual empowerment that allows students to witness the transformation of a community and its residents over a decade. Available from New Day Films [www.newday.com].

Living Broke in Boom Times: Lessons from the Movement to End Poverty (73 minutes)

This film chronicles the decade-long efforts of the movement to end poverty, condensing three documentary films (*Takeover*, *Poverty Outlaw* and *Outriders*) showcasing the community organizing efforts of poor, unemployed, and homeless people across the country. The film features wrap-around commentary from key activists in the movement, Cheri Honkala, Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharis, who discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their organizing efforts and lessons learned. Excerpts from *Takeover* follow the efforts of homeless people in eight cities across the U.S. to occupy abandoned HUD homes on May 1, 1990. The goal of the occupations was to draw attention to the plight of homeless people throughout the country. While takeovers led to numerous arrests, in some communities, these efforts led to increased availability of affordable housing. *Poverty Outlaw* explores the lengths to which a woman must go to survive when the tenuous safety nets for the poor fail. Lauded as a “survival guide” for poor women, the film depicts the harsh realities faced by poor women, especially those with young children, and the difficult, sometimes illegal choices they must make to survive. *Outriders* chronicles the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign New Freedom Bus Tour in which a bus load of poor people traveled the United States to document human right violations experienced by poor and homeless people. After 10,000 miles of travel, the organizers presented their findings to the United Nations as documentation of violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This film can be shown in whole or in part and provides powerful testimony to the struggles of the poor and the impact that even the most marginalized people can have to effect positive change. Available from New Day Films [www.newday.com].

Online Film Listing

I have posted an annotated guide of films that I have personally used to teach community psychology courses over the years on the SCRA site. The films depict communities facing a variety of challenges including chronic poverty, unemployment and underemployment, violence, substance use, gentrification, and more. Some of the films are mere depictions of community issues that can serve to set a context for discussions about community psychology approaches to the issues presented. Others depict citizens organizing themselves to transform their communities through grassroots movements, partnerships with businesses, local government, and philanthropic organizations, while others depict communities organizing to take on corporations, and government entities. In addition, the guide provides suggestions for effective use of films in the classroom, and an extensive listing of film sources.

Happy viewing!