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A Biblical Approach to Community Psychology and Social Transformation.

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Introduction

Social reform and transformation has been the foci of community psychology since its development in the 1950's and 1960's in the United States to address social issues that stemmed from historical socio-political events, such as colonialism and slavery. These events and continuous wars also led to patterns of migration, poverty and the rise of social issues in Africa. The need for interventions that could support and build up diverse communities to prevent pathology and promote mental health is undeniable.

Community psychology developed, based on an eco-systemic worldview that includes different systems, such as family, school, work, friends, religion, spiritual structures, social structures and political systems, in interventions with the aim to build up communities. Furthermore, this approach provides a framework for a Christian Community Psychology that could allow collaboration with faith-based communities in planning strategies that could help communities to flourish.



In this article, a Christian community project that was implemented in Katutura, a township in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia, a country in the South West region of Africa is briefly discussed.

It demonstrates how a Christian community psychology could contribute to resolving social issues; build stronger communities and lead to social transformation.

Community Psychology and Social Transformation

Community psychology developed in the 1950's and 1960's based on a paradigm shift that emphasises cultural discourses, respect for "local" and "expert" knowledge and openness to diverse worldviews. The aspiration that stems from the shift is that community

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psychology could address social conditions that increase the risk of distress and illness. Furthermore, interventions could be created to align with the needs of the community at stake and not based on expert knowledge only.

Different models are distinguished that include both theory and practice, i.e., the mental health-, social action-, organisational-, ecological- and phenomenological models. In a South African study the social action model was found to be the most effective of five models (Edwards, 2002). Certain worldview assumptions undergird each model. According to Canning (2011) the values of [Community Psychology \(CP\)](#) aligns with Christian beliefs. According to Joubert (2017) this allows for a Christian Community Psychology approach that could be used as a basis for collaboration between faith-based communities and Christian community psychologist to work together towards social transformation.

A Christian Worldview and Social Transformation

Social transformation is the process of change that affects people's lifestyle, status, institutionalized relationships, norms, values, and hierarchical systems over a period of time. Various global and cultural factors lead to social transformation, such as economic growth, science and technological innovations, social activism, political upheavals and war (Omondi, 2018; Reference, 2020; Rabie, 2013). Social transformation is more radical, whereas social reform refers to more gradual changes in society that changes people's perception of marginalized groups and improves living conditions.

Although socio-political and socio-economical factors steer social transformation, it is God at work in the history of humanity. According to Vorster (2014) Calvin's doctrine on Christian life posits that God progressively realizes the principles of the kingdom in human history through the social actions of Christians. In the Old Testament Isaiah speaks to the nation of Israel about the command of the Lord regarding social justice. In Isaiah 58:71 he says: "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked that you cover him, and that you hide not yourself from the needs of your own flesh and blood?" has a clear message from the Lord's demand for social justice.

The teachings of Jesus in the New Testament further provides a basis for the Christian perspective on social reform. In Matthew 23:23 the Pharisees are strongly reprimanded for burdening people with additional laws but neglecting justice: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and

dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."

Paul's letter to the Galatians addressed the need for social justice. Paul says in Galatians 5:13-14 how believers should serve one another: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The realization of the above-mentioned calling can only take place through intentional action to achieve the goals of social transformation. In the context of the early church we have Tabitha (Dorcas) as an example of intentional social action. In Acts 9: 36-39 her deeds are described: "...She was abounding in good deeds and acts of charity...All the widows stood around him (Peter) crying, and displaying under-shirts and other garments such as Dorcas was accustomed to make while she was with them"

In the social justice stream of the Christian faith the focus is on justice and peace in all human *relationships and social structures. It emphasizes the gospel imperative for equity and compassion among all peoples.*

Christian Community Psychology

Social transformation is not only a biblical command but also a critical factor in the vision for improved healthcare. Partnerships between Christian community psychologists and communities could help to plan interventions that could lead to social transformation. When Christian faith communities and (Christian) Community psychologists join in action and address contextual issues from a eco-systemic perspective they can aid and support intentional social actions to bring about social change. Christian faith communities are called to function in relationship to God and worship him, to participate in the world and to serve each other.

The following diagram (diagram 1) illustrates how all persons are embedded in ecosystems and it portrays the ultimate system, the all-encompassing system as God himself. It is within these systems that healing and transformation should take place as all systems affect human functioning and mental health.

In the next section an application of this approach to a community at risk is described to demonstrate how Christian Community Psychology can contribute to social transformation.

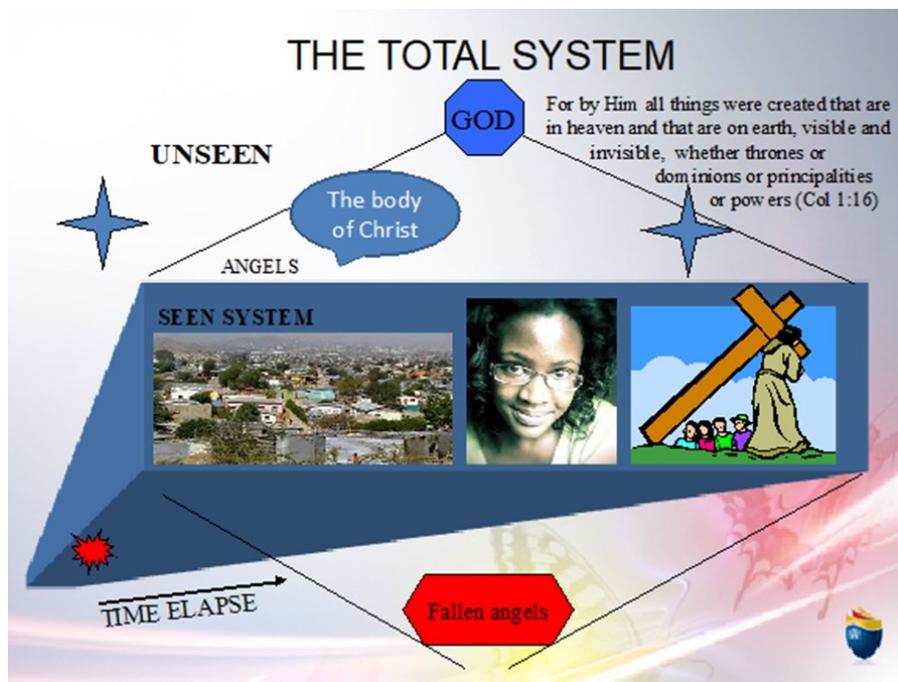


Diagram 1: The All-encompassing System

Case Study Application

A Christian Community Psychology approach was applied to a community in Katutura in Windhoek, Namibia, a country in South-west Africa (see photos at the end of the article).

The Socio-Political Background of Katutura

Katutura, a vibrant city where 60% of the Windhoek population lives, has a socio-political history that contributes to the social issues in the city. According to Melber (2017) black and colored people were forced to move from the Old Location to Katutura, a newly established township in the 1960's. Many inhabitants resisted the move, which resulted in clashes with the authorities. The new township was given to the Damara people in Namibia. The meaning of the name, "we do not have a permanent home", indicates a loss of security and identity. Acknowledging and understanding the socio-political history of this community is relevant for effective community interventions

The social issues in the township include, amongst others, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, HIV and teenage pregnancies. The traditional beliefs and practices are still strongly in place in Katutura, although the younger generation's worldview is shifting.

A Christian Community Psychology Project

A Christian Community Psychology project, implemented in partnership with a NPO in Windhoek to tackle one of the social issues, teenage pregnancies, demonstrates the

application of a Christian Community Psychology model.

The focus of the project was on young, unmarried pregnant girls, between the ages of 15-25, in the Katutura community. The community was identified as being at risk as the number of young, pregnant unmarried girls is increasing. Furthermore, according to Joubert (2017:96) "these girls tend to isolate when pregnant, which lead to further risks in terms of not completing their education and thus not able to find good employment later. It might likewise cause the girls to harbour feelings of rejection leading to low self-worth, loneliness and depression". In the design of the project the Damara culture and beliefs were considered.

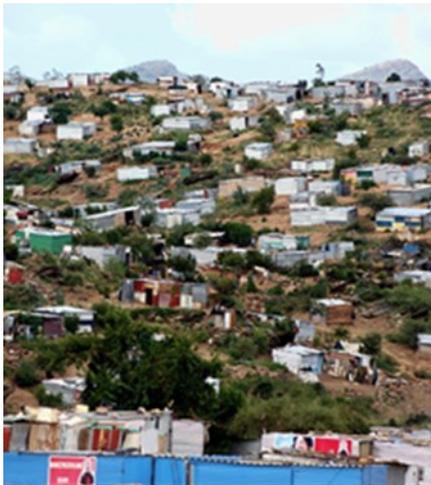
The project started with an appreciative inquiry to find out what works best in the community. The appreciate inquiry highlighted the vibrancy of the city and the wisdom provided by traditional beliefs. It was followed by creating a vision or dream that instils hope in the community. The dream was to see teenage pregnancies decrease; teenage mothers better prepared for the birth of their babies and to return to school get a better education with consequent employment that could break the cycle of poverty.

Interventions were co-designed and included a lecture to inspire the understanding of the value of a child based on Psalm 139: 13-165; a video on the growth of a baby; participation and support for the girls to share their story and education regarding labour signs, labour positions, breast feeding and bottle feeding. At the end of the eight weeks a baby shower was given to the girls (Joubert, 2017: 96). The objectives of the

intervention were to provide prenatal education; establish a non-judgmental support group; share prenatal experiences; improve their general lifestyle and to strengthen their bio/psycho/socio/spiritual level of functioning. Ps 139: 13-166 states the intimate involvement of God with every growing baby in the womb.

The outcomes of the project indicated that the group was positively impacted in terms of the objectives. One of the most noteworthy changes was the sense of isolation that diminished because the group could share their stories with others in a safe environment. Further results included an increased appreciation for life, a better grasp on motherhood and baby care, hope for a better future, a desire to continue with their education, and gratitude towards the community for the baby shower.

The case study supports the feasibility of a Christian Community Psychology approach to social change. The approach allows a community to explore the spiritual context of mental health issues and include faith-based interventions in the plan to transform the community. Such interventions could include collective prayer offered to God to seek His help and guidance. 1 John 5:147 states clearly that our prayers are heard. *“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”*



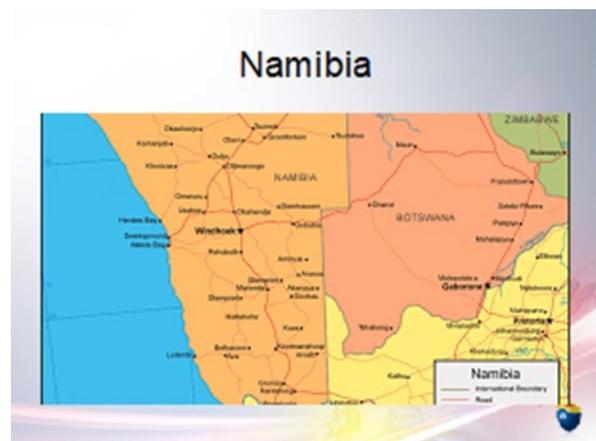
A Photo of Katutura, a Township in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia

Critique

Several points of critique are noted regarding community psychology. Firstly, personal choices and individual responsibility might become weak if the “system” is blamed for every social issue. Secondly, the boundaries of the discipline should be clearly described as a sub-field of psychology. Furthermore, the limitations of community psychologists, as part of the elite educated people in society that do not fully understand the experiences of people at the grass roots level, should be acknowledged.

Conclusion

This article indicates how the framework of community psychology allows a Christian psychology approach towards social transformation. Partnerships between Christian community psychologists and faith-based communities and NPO’s could promote social transformation from a biblical perspective. Furthermore, the church as a healing community could be fully utilised to alleviate suffering, facilitate social change to achieve the goals of wellness.



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