

PERSPECTIVE

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Special Edition
AUGUST 2013

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In Pursuit of Communal Thriving: Reflections on SCRA 2013

By Isaac Prilleltensky

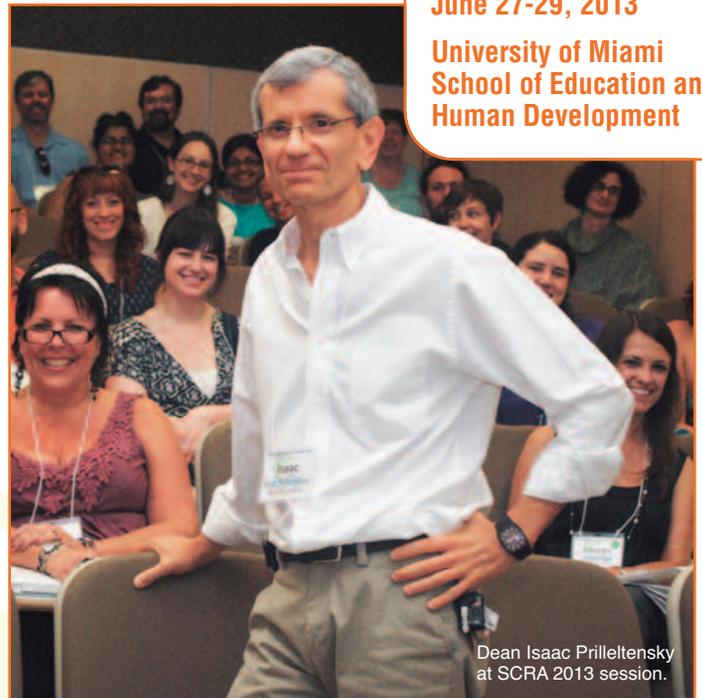
In a world filled with headlines about things going wrong, the biennial conference of the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), Division 27 of the American Psychological Association, focused on how community psychologists can help make the world a better place. With three days of talks, roundtable discussions, a poster session, town meeting, preconference workshops, and innovative, interactive sessions, our conference fully reflected its title, "Communal Thriving: Pursuing Meaning, Justice & Well-Being."

More than 600 professionals from 19 countries attended SCRA 2013, which was hosted by the University of Miami School of Education and Human Development. Throughout the conference, professionals discussed strategies to help communities draw upon their strengths to overcome challenges like poverty, racial injustice, poor healthcare, and educational failures.

Prior to the official start of SCRA 2013, we hosted a half-day summit where 120 community psychologists from around the world shared ideas about the practice of community well-being. During the conference, there were five keynote talks, along with dozens of breakout sessions and social and networking activities.

To help bring theory to life, we included a Miami track, showcasing our local efforts with the School's community partners and sharing our findings and best practices. We also used the conference to announce the launch of our doctoral program in community well-being. This new Ph.D. program – the first of its kind in Florida – is a major addition to our School's curriculum and extends our commitment to educating future generations of community psychologists.

To minimize the use of paper, we developed the SCRA 2013 mobile application with schedules, maps, and updates as well as a Twitter feed. Attendees appreciated being able to access that information at any time from any location. Another highlight was a community toolbox – an online resource for community



Dean Isaac Prilleltensky
at SCRA 2013 session.

practitioners seeking to develop skills, knowledge, applications, and methods to improve community well-being.

We also were able to achieve our goal of providing a sense of communal well-being for participants. One of our School's guiding principles is that a good process that brings people together is essential to producing good outcomes.

Finally, I would like to thank our attendees, presenters, and sponsors for making SCRA 2013 such a success, with a high level of engagement and participation throughout the conference. I am already looking forward to the next biennial conference, SCRA 2015 in Lowell, Massachusetts.

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2013 Biennial Conference
June 27-29, 2013

University of Miami
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Shalala Calls University a 'Vital Resource' for Community

Addressing SCRA 2013 attendees at the opening keynote session on June 27, University of Miami President Donna Shalala spoke of the importance of advancing community well-being. "As an ethnically and economically diverse university, we take social justice very seriously," she said. "We also extend student learning out to the community and nurture their burning desire for what's right and what's just."



Keynote Speaker
Dr. Michelle Fine

Shalala also commended the leadership of Dean Isaac Prilleltensky in transforming the School of Education and Human Development, which serves as a "vital resource for our university and the entire community."

Keynote speaker Dr. Michelle Fine emphasized the importance of public

policy research in her talk, "On Participatory Policy Research in Times of Swelling Inequality Gaps." A Distinguished Professor of Social Psychology, Women's Studies and Urban Education at the Graduate Center, CUNY, Fine is a founding faculty member of the Public Science Project (PSP), a consortium of researchers, policy makers and community activists.



Dr. Fine with SCRA Conference planning committee: Dean Prilleltensky, Scott Evans, and Adam Clarke.

"It is critical for professionals to engage with urgent social issues," Fine said, citing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and activist W.E.B. Dubois, who studied the problem of racism in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia and published his findings in the 1899 book, **"The Philadelphia Negro."** She said, **"Dubois flipped the script on downstream research about the consequences of oppression to look upstream and remind whites that these conditions were caused by policies."**



Venus Rising, a local drum and dance ensemble, at the opening ceremony.

highlights

What Does Community Psychology Offer Mainstream Psychology?

Community psychology can have a beneficial influence on many branches of psychology, provided common ground can be found between the two differing approaches, according to participants in a June 27 roundtable discussion on “What Does Community Psychology have to Offer Back to Mainstream Psychology?” As Brad Olson, National Louis University, said, “We have the theories and research tools for mainstream psychologists who want to do outreach in the community.”

Participants in the session reported on their experiences at a recent American Psychological Association (APA) event focusing on community outreach. Jessica Goodkind, University of New Mexico, said mainstream psychologists see a need for more community-engaged psychological science (CEPS), but not necessarily in the values that form the foundation for many community psychology strategies. She noted the key difference between the values of traditional clinical objectivity and promotion of well-being and social justice.

However, several international attendees said they were surprised to learn about tension between the two approaches. “The dynamics are different in our country and in Europe,” said one practitioner from New Zealand.

School of Education and Human Development Dean Isaac Prilleltensky launched the sessions by posing several questions for community psychologists: “Are we willing to engage in a dialogue and perhaps lose some of our distinct professional identity? Are we willing to focus more on traditional research, rather than issues of injustice and oppression that mainstream psychologists don’t want to hear about?”

In response, Jack Tebes, Yale University, said, “Just as in marriage, we can accept and engage mainstream psychology, even if we have our differences. We are a very small field, and if we want to have an impact, we should reach out and build partnerships with clinical psychology, as well as other academic disciplines.”

Summing up the conversation, John Moritsugu, Pacific Lutheran University, said, “We forget that 40 years ago, no one thought about the ethics in human subject experimentation until people like community psychologists raised those issues. Now, we can use those lessons of the past to show how our field has contributed to the advancement of the science of psychology.”

At The Conference...



(Left) Varzi Jean Baptiste, Etiony Aldarondo, and Adam Clarke.

(Above) The on-campus food trucks offered a “taste” of Miami.

(Right) Laura Kohn-Wood and Scott Evans at a session about the UM Community and Social Change Master’s program.



Promoting Wellness in An Interactive Virtual World

In an innovative approach to promote health and wellness, SCRA 2013 attendees had an opportunity to “test drive” an interactive online game, Wellness in Your Hands™, being developed by the School of Education and Human Development.

In the June 28 session, “Promoting Wellness Through Games and Online Engagement: An Interactive Workshop,” participants interacted with the prototype of a new virtual world that focuses on the six domains of well-being: interpersonal, physical, community, psychological, occupational, and economic.

Participants were prompted by animated coaching characters to play and learn about research-based health promotion skills and strategies to improve their well-being. “Our goal is to move toward more interaction and away from traditional lists of boring facts,” said Dean Isaac Prilleltensky, who organized the session with Samantha Dietz, assistant scientist at the School. “This is a healthy, fun, and personalized approach to social, communal, and educational well-being,” said Prilleltensky.



Carolyn Rubenstein and Samantha Dietz with Chris Kirk, Atlantic Health System.

A Collaborative Local Partnership

SCRA 2013 attendees learned about the School’s collaborative approach to addressing community issues at a June 28 symposium, “Miami Thrives: Weaving a Poverty Reduction Network.” Daniella Levine, Catalyst Miami, presented highlights of the poverty-reduction initiative in which the School’s research team works alongside a community-based organization to promote social change.



Playing the Wellness in Your Hands game.