

# The work experiences and needs of lone community psychologists: Exploring diversity of settings and identities

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## Abstract

Community psychologists (CPs) are committed to value-based praxis, an interdisciplinary orientation, and an ecological approach to community collaboration in pursuit of social justice and liberation. Because no setting is immune to the impacts of the intersecting systems of oppression in which we are embedded, CPs end up working in a wide array of settings, and often as the only CP in the setting. This dynamic—operating as a “lone” CP—may be rewarding as the CP is able to provide unique value at work, or may present specific challenges, particularly if the CP's sense of community or mattering is compromised. We interviewed  $n = 31$  lone CP to explore their work experiences, including the benefits, challenges, and what they need to thrive in their current setting. Findings reveal a wide array of experiences among CPs, related to their community psychology, and other identities. Participants consistently discussed the important role of values in their decision-making and experiences at work, and provide specific recommendations as to how the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) can ensure all CPs across all settings can thrive. This includes providing more tangible and relational support, changing SCRA's culture and priorities, and improving community psychology undergraduate and graduate training.

**KEYWORDS**

community psychologists, community psychology, mattering, sense of community, Society for Community Research and Action, training, work experiences

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Community psychologists (CPs) are defined by their commitment to value-based praxis, an interdisciplinary orientation, and an ecological approach to community collaboration in pursuit of social justice and liberation (Campbell, 2016; Prilleltensky, 2001; Riemer et al., 2020). No setting is immune to the impacts of the intersecting systems of oppression in which we are embedded. Accordingly, the CP's commitments draw them into an array of settings, including inter- and multidisciplinary spaces in which they may be the only CP. The relatively few community psychology graduate training programs may also contribute to this pattern; fewer CPs are out in the world as compared to individuals from other fields, making it more likely that the CP finds themselves in a setting with few or no other CPs. CPs may thrive in such contexts, as this dynamic may allow them to provide a unique value to their setting and context. If the setting prioritizes social justice, ecological approaches, community engagement, or other community psychology values and principles, the "lone" CP will likely feel valued and that they matter in this space. It is also possible that their lone status impacts their ability to carry out their work due to a diminished sense of community, connectedness, or mattering. This may be particularly true for CPs who are in settings not aligned with or valuing community psychology principles or approaches. CPs, like other social scientists, study the experiences and contexts of a diversity of "others," but often do not examine their own experiences or contexts. While there is a small body of research examining the training-related experiences of CPs, there is scant research examining the work experiences of CPs. The purpose of this study is to examine the work experiences and needs of lone CPs—individuals who are the only, or one of a few, CP(s) in their work setting—to inform the development of strategies and resources to support them, and to improve their sense of connectedness, value, and mattering at work and in the field.

### 1.1 | CPs at work

While some CPs pursue careers within the academy, many do not. In conducting the first study of its kind, Viola et al. (2017) surveyed 420 CPs, and found that faculty positions were the most common placement, but accounted for less than half of their survey respondents (47%). The remaining respondents were researchers (21%); executive leaders (i.e., CEOs, COOs, VPs, Directors, and Executive Directors; 8%); managers or supervisors (7%); social workers (6%); program evaluators (6%); consultants (4%); and nonresearch program or project coordinators (1%). These full-time positions outside of academia were in government, healthcare, nonprofits, and consulting or evaluation firms. Indeed, though jobs outside of the academy "are rarely advertised as, 'looking for a community psychologist'" (Viola et al., 2017, p. 12), CPs work in a wide array of settings: healthcare, health promotion, and public health settings; nonprofit agencies and community-based organizations; educational systems and settings; government and public policy; criminal legal agencies; foundations; community development, environmental, and international organizations; research and evaluation firms; independent consulting; and in business, technology, and entrepreneurship (McMahon et al., 2015; McMahon & Wolfe, 2017). Though CPs find themselves in diverse settings, we know relatively little about their experiences. A very limited literature has explored how CPs are trained (e.g., type of graduate program; specific competencies), discussed how that training influences and is applied to the jobs they pursue, and cataloged different career options, most often through first-person narratives (Feis

et al., 1990; Ribisl, 2000; van de Hoef et al., 2011; Viola & Glantsman, 2017; Wilcox, 2000). While these efforts can provide insight into how CPs might embark on specific career paths (see Viola & Glantsman, 2017), we have not yet examined empirically their work experiences once on the job. What allows CPs to thrive in diverse work settings, particularly when they are the lone CP in the setting? Do they feel as though they are able to do good, meaningful work? What additional support is needed?

## 1.2 | Sense of community and mattering at work

If you ask any CP what allows one to thrive in a specific setting or community—such as a workplace—sense of community is likely to be part of their answer. CPs have long been interested in examining sense of community—“the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully a part of a larger collectivity” (Sarason, 1974, p. 1). A core tenet in the field of community psychology, a sense of community has important implications for individuals' well-being and happiness, as well as for the welfare of the broader community (Kloos et al., 2012; Stewart & Townley, 2020). Since Sarason first introduced the idea of the sense of community some 50 years ago, CPs have further defined it by identifying its component parts, developing measures to assess it, and examining it in an array of contexts (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Stewart & Townley, 2020). Though perhaps not the first example that comes to mind, the workplace is an important community in most people's lives, as it is where they spend much of their time (Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Klein & D'Aunno, 1986). In fact, the extent to which individuals have a sense of community within the workplace has been found to have significant impacts on multiple facets of their lives, including their identity, life satisfaction, mental health, and social values (e.g., Boyd & Nowell, 2014; Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Garrett et al., 2017; Klein & D'Aunno, 1986). More recent research on the sense of community in the workplace has developed the community experience model to investigate how the community can be both a resource and a responsibility, as the organizational context meets employees' needs to feel like they belong and are connected to the organization, and the employee feels a sense of responsibility to contribute to the organization (Boyd & Nowell, 2017, 2020; Boyd et al., 2018; Nowell & Boyd, 2010, 2014, 2014).

Prilleltensky (2020) argues that the yearning for a sense of community stems from a fundamental human need to matter. Holding psychological, philosophical, and political significance, mattering consists of feeling valued, and adding value. This is similar to Nowell and Boyd's (2010, 2014) framing of a sense of community to include the community as a resource, as well as a responsibility. In feeling valued, individuals feel appreciated and respected. In adding value, individuals are able to make a contribution or have an impact. Prilleltensky (2020) calls specific attention to the importance of mattering in the workplace, and includes, “work,” as a key component in the mattering conceptual framework. Prilleltensky (2014, p. 152) describes the workplace as a context in which individuals may feel “recognized or ignored, helpless or influential, valued or forgotten.” This then has significant impacts on productivity, engagement, and overall well-being (Prilleltensky, 2020). Thus, in exploring the work experiences of lone CPs across diverse settings, we must examine their sense of community and mattering at work.

## 2 | CURRENT STUDY

In 2017, Shaw, Chávez, and Voight applied for and were selected as the new cohort of Leadership Development Fellows (LDFs) for the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA)—Community Psychology, Division 27 of the American Psychological Association. The LDF program was created to nurture the professional development of early career CPs committed to research and action, and develop future leaders for SCRA. In addition to other activities, LDFs complete a Fellow's project that can contribute to and inform the work of SCRA. When Shaw, Chávez, and Voight started as LDFs, they were all lone CPs—the only CPs in their current work settings. In discussing their work experiences with one another, Shaw, Chávez, and Voight learned that a shared motivating

factor in their decisions to apply for the LDF program was the opportunity to be in community with one another—with other CPs—as they did not have this in their current work setting. Shaw, Chávez, and Voight imagined other lone CPs were perhaps craving similar connection that SCRA could help facilitate, but did not want to ascribe such sentiments and need for connectedness to others. Instead, Shaw, Chávez, and Voight thought it worthwhile to examine empirically the work experiences of lone CPs, and what they needed from SCRA to support them in their current work settings. This became the Fellows' project—a mixed methods study to (1) examine how many CPs were lone CPs, and how work experiences varied based on lone/nonlone status through a quantitative survey, and (2) explore in-depth the work experiences and needs of lone CPs through qualitative interviews. In this manuscript, we report findings from the qualitative interviews in which we set out to answer a series of focused research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** Why do CPs choose to work in settings where they are the only CP?

**RQ2:** What are the benefits of being a lone CP?

**RQ3:** What are the challenges of being a lone CP?

**RQ4:** Do lone CPs feel as though they matter in their current work setting?

**RQ5:** With whom do lone CPs collaborate?

**RQ6:** Do lone CPs feel connected to and a sense of community with other CPs?

**RQ7:** How do lone CPs define a CP, and how has their work setting shaped or changed this?

**RQ8:** How could SCRA better support CPs?

In developing and carrying out this study, it was important to us to take an intersectional approach in our exploration of lone CPs' work experiences. The intersecting systems of oppression in which we are embedded (e.g., racism and white supremacy, patriarchy, cisheterosexism, religious oppression, adultism) place individuals at specific intersections of structural violence (e.g., health, economic, educational inequities) as a function of their assigned group-based identities (e.g., race, gender, religions, age). An intersectional approach, introduced and developed by Black feminists (see Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017), encourages us to fully engage the many intersections of privilege and oppression that shape individuals' experiences. Thus, while we do not conceptualize our examination of CPs' work experiences as a direct study of intersectionality and systems of oppression, we cannot understand fully the experiences of lone CPs without inviting them to bring their full selves to the conversation, and contextualizing their experiences accordingly. Indeed, we can expect CPs' work experiences to be shaped and influenced not only by their community psychology identities and lone community psychologist status, but also by other aspects of who they are that shape how they are seen by, interact with, and allowed to move in the world. Accordingly, we invited interview participants to routinely consider other aspects of who they are that interact with and influence their experiences.

## 3 | METHOD

### 3.1 | Participants

To identify and recruit lone CPs for this study, we sent a series of research invitation emails on the SCRA listserv from mid-June 2019 through the end of August 2019. Specifically, the email invited individuals who identified as (1) a CP, and (2) the only or one of a few CPs in their work setting to participate in an interview. The recruitment email explained that the qualitative interviews would focus on their current work setting, how their lone CP status and other identities shape and are shaped by their experiences, and how SCRA may better support the work of all CPs. Individuals interested clicked a link in the invitation where they were able to provide their contact information so a member of the research team could contact them to schedule an interview. Thirty-nine individuals initially expressed interest in being interviewed. We were unable to schedule interviews with eight of these individuals after they initially expressed interest, resulting in a final sample of  $n = 31$  participants. While a sample size of 10–20

participants is sufficient to reach saturation in a qualitative study with narrow objectives among a relatively homogeneous sample (Bernard et al., 2017; Hennink & Kaiser, 2021), it was important to the research team that all interested participants had the opportunity to share their stories, thus we made the decision to interview all participants who expressed interest in participating.

### 3.2 | Procedure

Interviews were conducted via Zoom between September and December 2019. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission, and after obtaining informed consent. Three members of the research team (Shaw, Chávez, and Voight) conducted the 1–2 h interviews, and interviewers were strategically assigned to participants with whom they had no pre-existing relationships. Interviewers asked the same set of questions to each participant, guided by the semi-structured interview protocol. Interview audio recordings were transcribed via Rev, an interview transcription service. Research team members reviewed, cleaned, and corrected inaccuracies in all transcripts before analysis. All procedures were approved as exempt by the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board.

The interview protocol consisted of four main sections: (1) description of work unit and environment; (2) experience within work unit and environment; (3) building support and connection among CPs; and (4) demographic information. Before starting the interview and in line with the intersectional approach of the project, the interviewer explained to the participant that being in a setting in which they are the only representative of their discipline can be a complicated experience to navigate, and that many aspects of who they are, including but not limited to their gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, sexual orientation, immigration status, religion, body shape or size, geographic background, military status, socioeconomic status, may influence their experience in a workplace setting. The interviewer informed the participant that we were interested in understanding their whole experience—the good, the bad, the in-between, and how different aspects of their identity shape and are shaped by their experience, and that the interviewer would likely probe or invite the participant to reflect on their identity in relation to their experiences throughout the interview process. Following this framing, the first section of the interview protocol focused on obtaining a description of the participant's work unit and environment. Participants were asked to describe what led them to identify as a CP; their current work position and setting; and how they came to be in their current position. The second section of the interview protocol focused on the participant's experiences within their work unit and environment. Participants were asked to describe their overall experience in their current work setting; the benefits and advantages of being a lone CP in their setting; the challenges, tensions, or conflicts of being a lone CP in their setting; with whom they collaborate at work; and if they feel as though they matter at work. *Mattering* was framed as feeling as though they bring value, and are valued in their current setting (Prilleltensky, 2020). Participants were also asked if their current setting changed how they think about or define community psychology, or made more or less salient other aspects of who they are. The third section of the interview protocol focused on building support and connection among CPs. Participants were asked if they felt connected to other CPs, about their involvement with SCRA and other organizations, and what SCRA could do better to support their work. Finally, the last section of the interview protocol probed demographic information with a single question. Instead of asking participants to list which categories they belonged to across a specified set of demographics (e.g., race, gender), we invited participants to share with us any aspects of their intersectional identities that they felt helped to define who they are and influenced their experiences. Most aligned with an intracategorical intersectional approach (McCall, 2005), we chose to focus less on being able to place our participants systematically into pre-existing demographic categories, and instead to recognize the socially-constructed, dynamic nature, and complexity of such categories by letting our participants define who they are on their own terms.

### 3.3 | Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded following Miles et al. (2020) three-phased approach, consisting of (1) data condensation; (2) data display; and (3) drawing and verifying conclusions. Though presented as three phases, these steps often happen simultaneously and iteratively. The data in this project were well-suited to move quickly into the development of data displays. The research team developed a series of matrices corresponding to each of the focused research questions of interest. Interview transcript data were then condensed by identifying sections in each transcript that were directly responsive to a given matrix's research question. This was possible because the research questions of interest were probed explicitly in the interview, and asked in a similar order. Once data were placed into the appropriate matrix, they were independently coded by two research team members. The research team members then met to review their initial codes; identify, discuss, and resolve any disagreements; and sort the codes into themes. Once themes that provided answers to each of the research questions were developed, the matrices were reorganized to make clear which participants provided data in relation to each theme under each research question. This manipulation of the data matrices allowed for comparisons to be made across participants, and the development and verification of conclusions.

## 4 | RESULTS

To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to identify as CPs. The vast majority ( $n = 27$ ) of participants explained that they identified as a CP because of their training in a community psychology graduate program, in a graduate program with a community emphasis, or with a CP. Most participants ( $n = 26$ ) also discussed their identification with the values and orientation of community psychology as part of what made them a CP. About a quarter of participants ( $n = 7$ ) also mentioned their involvement with SCRA as part of their community psychology identity. Participants worked in a range of settings, including community-based organizations, consulting firms, government agencies, national nonprofits, healthcare institutions, and academic institutions. Twenty-six participants were working in the United States, with the remainder working in Canada ( $n = 4$ ) or Europe ( $n = 1$ ). The majority of participants had a PhD ( $n = 26$ ); the remaining participants had a master's degree ( $n = 5$ ). Additional demographics were not systematically collected from participants. Instead, participants were invited to share aspects of their identities that they thought helped to define who they are, and their experiences in the world. To honor what participants chose to disclose and chose to keep for themselves, and to not force individuals into categories with which they may not self-identify, we do not provide demographics for the entire sample. Instead, we share aspects of participants' identities that they deemed important to share alongside their quotes, while also taking care to ensure our demographic descriptions cannot be used to identify individual participants.

### 4.1 | RQ1: Why do CPs choose to work in settings where they are the only CP?

Participants provided a number of different reasons for their decision to work in their current position: the values or culture of the organization ( $n = 22$ ); a desire to work in a specific type of setting or substantive area ( $n = 20$ ); a desire to have a certain type of influence or impact ( $n = 14$ ); personal or financial reasons ( $n = 11$ ); or as a stepping stone to other positions ( $n = 10$ ). Most often ( $n = 22$ ), participants explained that they chose to be in their current position because of the values or culture of the organization, and how they and the organization had "the same agenda" (Participant 123). Participants highlighted the importance of a work culture that supported a "boundary between work and home life" (Participant 132) and "more flexibility" (Participant 106). Participants also highlighted values of "social justice" (Participant 123), "openness to new ideas" (Participant 105), "using research and evaluation to improve practice and inspire policy change" (Participant 132), seeing "the community as the expert and ... centering

marginalized voices and populations when we do our work" (Participant 138). The specific value of diversity was commonly discussed by participants. Some participants spoke of the importance of diversity in their organizations in relation to being "interdisciplinary," (Participant 22), and having a "diversity of backgrounds, so people from social work and sociology and developmental psych, and clinical psych" (Participant 132). Others talked about the importance of diversity as modeled by a racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse workforce. Participant 120, a Spanish-speaking, white Latino father, who grew up in an urban working class setting, was a first-generation college student, and is married to a woman, explained how his current work setting modeled the value of diversity and stood in contrast to his prior positions,

Oftentimes, I was like the token Latino, or the only Latino. Whereas here, I'm working with people who are white, Muslim, Latino, Latina, and African American, and they're like lawyers, they range from administrative assistants to lawyers, and heads of departments, and that's just the norm, it's a different culture.

Participants also often mentioned wanting to work in a specific type of setting or substantive area as what led them to their current position ( $n = 20$ ). Participants spoke about intentionally seeking out and accepting jobs in "government" (Participants 106; 107), as a "professor," (Participant 122), in "the practice world" (Participant 138), or where they could work on a specific issue or with a specific population (e.g., veterans, policy and bullying, children, etc.). Fourteen participants discussed wanting to be able to have a certain level or type of influence or impact as a key factor in choosing their current position. Participants spoke about wanting to "push the boundaries" (Participant 123), and "contribute on a broader community level scale" (Participant 103). Several white participants also spoke about intentionally choosing positions in settings where they might be able to interrupt racism, racial injustice, and segregation. Participant 114, a married, white heterosexual mother who grew up in a Protestant church, and whose parents were both the first in their families to go to college, explained,

Racial injustice has been something that has been really important to me as I've spent my life trying to better understand that and understand my privilege. Where I land in all of this has been really important. And [my city] is a majority Black city and is still really grappling with issues of segregated schools and racialized poverty, so being in this part of the country and being in [my city] has felt important. And now raising a son who is going to our neighborhood public school and thinking about all of that and being a parent and trying to work around public schools and youth, educational justice ... that feels like meaningful work to me.

Participant 104, an older generation white woman who was raised Catholic in a nonacademic upper-middle class family, was located in a very different area of the country, and shared a similar sentiment,

[This city] is a very racist community, even though everybody thinks the South is racist, but [this city] has its own version of racism and segregation ... I've invested a huge amount of time trying to challenge the university to look at systemic and structural racism and to move beyond the discourse of diversity. And as a white woman, it has been particularly challenging to do because students, particularly white students, don't think white people have anything to teach them about racism. They think they have to impose upon people of color to hear ... It's a horrible dynamic that is created in a predominately white elite institution, and racism and economic marginalization compete with each other for making [the] life of students who are not wealthy and white extremely challenging at the university.

In addition to discussing organizational culture and values; wanting to work in specific settings or on specific issues, and wanting to have a specific type of influence or impact, a third of the sample ( $n = 11$ ) explained how they were in their current position due to personal or financial reasons. This often included participants' "current family relationship" (Participant 113) or "family health issues" (Participant 129) that required them to be in or made more desirable a specific locale. Some participants described how their family composition and identities were a driving force in their job search process. Participant 118, a mother who is in a partnership with a woman and is the breadwinner of the family, explained,

I'm not heterosexual. I have a female partner and we were in [State 1] for a very long time ... and we didn't have the health insurance coverage or legal rights. So that's why we moved to [State 2] to begin with ... it also affected my decision for my job, like which jobs would cover my family ... [State 2] is very good with LGBT families.

Participant 101, a heterosexual cisgender white female who comes from a working class background and has a Black husband and mixed-race Black children told us,

I'm white and I'm female-identified, but I think where it came into play is that at the time I had an infant who's now a teen who's mixed race ... half Black. I was definitely looking for a community that had a Black population and some presence of Black community.

Finally, 10 participants described how they saw their current position as a way to get their "foot in the door," (Participants 111; 112) and a stepping-stone to other more desirable positions.

## 4.2 | RQ2: What are the benefits of being a lone CP?

In discussing benefits to being the lone CP in their current work setting, participants spoke about a range of beneficiaries: themselves ( $n = 22$ ); their work or the end user of their work ( $n = 15$ ); their organization ( $n = 8$ ); and the field of community psychology ( $n = 5$ ). In discussing how they, themselves, benefited from being the lone CP, participants explained how they were seen as valuable and an "expert" by colleagues and the community due to their "unique" "perspective" and ability to provide "something different that other people don't" (Participants 105; 107; 138); how this benefitted them through more "opportunity" and "influence" in their work setting (Participants 132; 137); and how they found it "fun" and fulfilling to interact with others who had different perspectives (Participants 101; 118; 128). Participant 106, a married Asian mother, explained,

When I was in grad school ... I focused on ... the cultural side of community psych ... [My current colleagues] really were intrigued by that. Because I was the only one doing it, I've got to be involved with everything and I got to take the lead on it ... If there was somebody else [another community psychologist] there ... I wouldn't mind sharing it, but because of that, it's really just me.

Participants discussed explicitly how their unique perspectives and contributions also benefited the work. Participant 139, a Catholic Filipina daughter of immigrants and mother who is married to a man, explained how the work benefited from a lone CP "using a different set of tools and strategies and perspectives ... to envision something different or a new way of doing things ... maybe posing a question that people might not have considered before." Participant 102, an East Asian woman and first-generation immigrant educated in the United States, described how the application of community psychology values, specifically benefitted the work by facilitating decision-making,



I've been working in government a lot recently. My sort of end goal is, is this ultimately going to benefit the people that we're supposed to be serving? The beneficiaries of whatever program or service or policy that you're trying to write, is this going to benefit them, and in what ways and how? Based on all my values, do I think this is empowering people? Do I think this is disempowering people? I feel like those values helped me to be more decisive, to be more clear about what kind of direction I want (to move in). I feel like it's really muddy for everybody else.

Several participants briefly described how the work also benefited from other aspects of who they are, such as being born and raised in the locale where the work took place (Participant 106) and holding "marginalized identities" that allowed them to "speak from a place of authority" (Participant 124). Beyond the work done on a specific project, participants also mentioned how the broader organization benefited from the lone CP on staff, as they played a key role in developing "partnerships," (Participant 112) and "allowed the company to get projects that are really specifically [focused] in community needs" (Participant 105).

Though discussed less frequently and raised exclusively by lone CPs in academic settings, participants also noted how the field of community psychology benefitted from them working in settings where they were the only CP. Participants described how they were able to "define," "represent," and "educate" others about the field of community psychology (Participants 114; 124; 129). Being the lone CP allowed participants to "spread the word" to others in contexts who would otherwise never learn about the field (Participants 112; 123). Participant 112, a relatively young, white woman who is a new mom and married to a man, described this unique and exciting opportunity,

Sometimes we're in these settings where we're around all of these people who have the same training. And are very likeminded, which is great, but then you're kind of just like all passing the same information amongst people who already have it. It's kind of nice to have people who are likeminded, but maybe don't have the training and feel like I'm spreading it, like evangelizing for community psychology a little bit.

### 4.3 | RQ3: What are the challenges of being a lone CP?

Despite these benefits, participants also described challenges to being the lone CP in their setting. This included conflict and tension due to value differences or disagreements ( $n = 21$ ); the CP not having what they needed to be successful ( $n = 14$ ); and having to take on extra labor ( $n = 14$ ). The most common challenge ( $n = 21$ ) was experiencing conflict or tension with others in their setting due to value differences, disagreements in how to approach or carry out the work, or others not viewing the CP or their work as legitimate or valuable. Participants discussed how their "social justice orientation" (Participant 122), focus on "systems" (Participant 111), and "different ways of thinking" (Participant 101) often conflicted with settings and colleagues who have "a very narrow understanding of what excellence looks like" (Participant 114), operate exclusively within a "post-positivist" framework (Participant 101), "don't want to do anything different" (Participant 118), or perceive the lone CP as "too radical" (Participant 110). Participant 101, a heterosexual cisgender white female who comes from a working-class background and has a Black husband and mixed-race Black children, explained how they "oriented towards the more critical philosophy," and had trouble "getting people to see the stuff that I do as legitimate." Participant 101 explained how they managed this tension before earning tenure by "hiding my approach, hiding my orientation to the science, hiding my criticisms of the discipline and our program and our pedagogy" and how "that was very awkward and uncomfortable" for them. Participant 124, a white person from a working poor background who does not align with a binary conception of gender, also discussed these tensions and the challenges in navigating them within academia,

Part of being raised in the working class and my ways of communicating and ways of being ... I want to take a political stance, or an ethical stance ... [but in academia] it's just very polite and nobody has those difficult conversations. I sometimes think, "like did they know what community psychology was when they decided they wanted me here?" ... I've heard people say, "oh, we really liked you. We wanted to hire you because we thought you would shake things up." But then when I try to, there's so much resistance, and that really is the intersection of my professional identity and social identities. Wanting to be really clear, really direct, tough love. Like, I still love you psychology, but you're letting me down ... I feel like that kind of [way of challenging the status quo] goes against some of the upper middle-class white culture of my institution.

Participants also discussed two additional challenges or tensions in being a lone CP: that they did not have what they needed to be successful ( $n = 14$ ) and that they had to take on extra work or labor ( $n = 14$ ). Participants spoke about not having what they need in that they lacked necessary tangible resources, social support and connection, and opportunities (i.e., opportunities for professional development; promotion and leadership; and collaboration). Several of these participants discussed explicitly how being the lone CP was "lonely," (Participants 103; 114; 115; 119) and "isolating" (Participants 112; 137). In discussing how they had to take on extra labor, participants described how it takes "a lot of energy," (Participant 129), it can "be exhausting," (Participant 128), and they often "hit an emotional wall" (Participant 115), as they always have to be the one person in the room presenting and advocating for a different perspective, and feeling "like you're the only one that cares about this stuff" (Participant 123).

#### 4.4 | RQ4: Do lone CPs feel as though they matter in their current work setting?

When asked if they felt like they mattered or not in their current work setting, participants discussed how they felt like they mattered when their work, expertise, and perspectives were sought out, validated, and utilized in their setting (work, skills, and expertise;  $n = 25$ ); when they were able to have influence and enact change in the community, in their organization, or in how their organization interacted with the community (impact and influence;  $n = 18$ ); when they were able to foster positive relationships and connections with others in their setting, or when their colleagues expressed appreciation and support for them and their contributions (interpersonal/relational;  $n = 18$ ); and when they received formal promotions, leadership opportunities, and recognition for their work (leadership and formal recognition;  $n = 10$ ). Participant 113, a married military spouse with a history of adverse childhood experiences, explained how they experienced mattering at work,

I think what they [my team members] most value is the strategic approach and vision that I bring to the work and so that we're—everything is always connected and we're never doing things that don't connect to the larger mission with the larger theory of change ... Everything they do matters, and their voice matters, and that have an opportunity to lead something ... Coming from a doc program ... you think wherever you go, you're going to continue to be surrounded by people that are just like that, and very similar skillset. So you think what you bring to the table is not that special or unique. When I came here ... I quickly realized ... this is unique, not everyone has this skillset. And that was also quickly recognized by other people that were like, "Oh wow, you can think about this differently."

While most participants described ways in which they felt like they mattered, some also described how they sometimes felt that they did not add value, or were not valued in their work setting. Participant 124, a white person from a working poor background who does not align with a binary conception of gender, explained,

Some of them are super excited about my research. I think others of them are like, that's not research. I think some people would say, "oh, that's humanistic or journalism." I've heard them say that about people I've been a part of bringing into interview for other [open job] positions. So, I've said this to some people, "when you say that, I feel like you're talking about me too, you know."

When asked if others valued her at work, Participant 106, a married Asian mother, stated explicitly,

No. That's the sad part because I think they will only notice it when I'm gone. I mean it's unfortunate because I think there were times in crisis, which we've been in quite a bit. They're like, "oh, thank God you're here." But then after the crisis is averted or it goes away or it takes a break, then it's kind of like, they forget about it. But whenever there's problems, I'm the first one they'll call. But I don't think they really appreciate, I think they take it for granted because I have kids who are still in school that I have nowhere else to go, then I'm just going to be here anyway. So whatever, you know. But I don't think they fully appreciate me to be honest.

#### 4.5 | RQ5: With whom do lone CPs collaborate?

Because participants' immediate work settings contained few or no other CPs, we asked participants with whom they collaborated. Twenty participants named the disciplinary backgrounds of their collaborators. This included clinical, developmental, educational, experimental, applied social, and administrative level psychology; Africa studies; anthropology; criminology; education; ethnic studies; geography; history; political science; public health; social science; social work; sociology; urban studies; and medical, legal, and business professionals (e.g., accountants, lawyers, medical providers). CPs also listed specific agencies, groups, or organizations ( $n = 10$ ); other CPs ( $n = 9$ ); and community members ( $n = 8$ ) as their collaborators. Participants described finding collaborators both within ( $n = 8$ ; e.g., other faculty), and beyond their work setting ( $n = 11$ ; e.g., at conferences or through community work), and continuing to collaborate with community psychology colleagues with whom they built relationships in former settings ( $n = 3$ ; e.g., graduate school colleagues). In describing how they choose their collaborators, participants discussed the importance of holding similar values, perspectives, and approaches ( $n = 18$ ), and having shared identities, backgrounds, and experiences ( $n = 3$ ). For example, Participant 120, a Spanish-speaking, white Latino father, who grew up in an urban working class setting, was a first-generation college student and is married to a woman, described how, "I mean, I do, when I see other CPs of color, I kind of do get excited. I'm excited to meet you. There's few of us, and so that always excites me...."

#### 4.6 | RQ6: Do lone CPs feel connected to and a sense of community with other CPs?

Most participants ( $n = 29$ ) described feeling a connection to and a sense of community with other CPs. Nineteen participants described feeling connected to and a sense of community with other CPs through their personal and direct connection with other CPs. This included connections from graduate school, friendships and personal relationships, and reaching out to other CPs related to their work. Many participants spoke about the importance of shared values and experiences as foundational in these connections and the sense of community they felt. However, about a third of participants ( $n = 10$ ) described how they did not have these kinds of direct or personal connections, and "don't feel like part of a community of them" (Participant 107). SCRA seemed to play an important role here. Indeed, 25 participants explicitly discussed SCRA as a facilitator of their connection to and sense of community with other CPs, specifically how SCRA facilitated relationships and connections with other CPs ( $n = 21$ )

and affirmed or supported one's role and identity as a CP through professional development and related opportunities ( $n = 16$ ). SCRA facilitated relationships and connections as participants were able to meet and interact with other CPs and like-minded individuals; give and receive mentorship; and really feel like they belong. Participants specifically referenced the biennial conference, regional conferences, interest groups, the listserv, and other gatherings as key spaces for connection. Participant 132, a heterosexual white male who has a romantic partner and for whom spirituality is important, discussed how,

There is something about it that is a little ineffable ... the first SCRA conference that I went to ... I was in my first year of graduate school and I was in a master's program, and grad school was hard and I was beleaguered and burned out, even within one year. And I'm like, I don't know if I want to keep doing grad work and pursue a Ph.D. I went to the SCRA conference and it just felt like a group of people who felt and thought similarly to me, who were kind of fed up with academia as usual, social progress as usual, hierarchies as usual, but who still felt like we were rebels infiltrating the academy. You didn't have to look like the prototype or the stereotype of the academic professional. You could be different, you could be weird even. I've often felt sort of weird and kind of on the margins and it felt like you could sort of stand in both places. You could be both on the margins, but work within the system in ways that didn't cheapen either. When I'm with somebody for whom community psychology is a salient part of their identity and I know that about them, in a way that I can't explain, I feel that when I'm with them, I'm at home.

In terms of professional development and related opportunities, participants discussed the importance of SCRA providing funding and awards; information about professional development and skill-building opportunities; access to new knowledge through articles, emails, and events; and an opportunity for the lone CP to contribute to the field by sharing their work.

Of course, this was not the case for all participants. Eight participants, the majority of whom were not in academic settings, discussed how they felt "disconnected" (Participant 116) and that they could not "fully engage with SCRA" (Participant 105). Participants spoke about how they had "public reports and things that are out there, [but] that none of them are published," (Participant 105), and the conference, for example, feels "really research-based," which left them feeling like they cannot "contribute unless I'm contributing in that way" (Participant 111). These participants described SCRA as "hopelessly too academic" (Participant 116), in its "own little world" (Participant 137), and that "it's deeply embedded in this organization that the practitioners are not of as much value" (Participant 119). Participant 118, a mother who is in a partnership with a woman and is the breadwinner of the family, explained, how she "feel[s] judged" by other CPs because she is not an academic. She went on to share,

I wish I was more involved with SCRA. I think it's just hard. I kind of think of community psychologists as pretentious. I know that sounds horrible, being a community psychologist myself. There's a lot of pretentiousness. For example, I often have to bring in experts in different prevention topics [for my work] and I often don't turn to my community psychology buddies, or not buddies, but like experts in the field, just because I don't think they would relate well to community folk, or really have an understanding of real community work. I know that's bad coming from me as a community psychologist. I feel like there's a little bit of a disconnect between community psychology and what's going on in the community. Somewhat a privileged kind of perspective that goes on. So if I'm looking for an expert to come in, I get experts to come in to talk about environmental strategies, policy change, how to create policy changes— and often I look to more grassroots, less academic folk just because I find that people relate to them better.

Seventeen participants also mentioned not feeling connected to or able to participate in SCRA as they did not have the capacity or resources to get involved (e.g., time), or simply had not made an effort to do so as of the interview.

#### 4.7 | RQ7: How do lone CPs define a CP, and how has their work setting shaped or changed this?

Participants discussed specific values and approaches that defined CPs, such as working in and with communities; the ecological model and importance of context; social and systems change; reflexivity and praxis; and the value of values. While participants' work settings did not change how they defined a CP, their settings did change the extent to which they identify as a CP and how they approach their work ( $n = 14$ ); what they think is important in training CPs ( $n = 11$ ); and their perspective on the field of community psychology ( $n = 10$ ). Several participants ( $n = 14$ ) discussed how their work setting led them to more readily identify as a CP as they had a renewed appreciation for the field, and additional validation of their work. Participant 139, a Catholic Filipina daughter of immigrants and a mother who is married to a man, discussed how their work setting made them value their training,

I think one key way that I think about community psychology differently as a result of my work setting is, I guess gratitude. I feel immense gratitude for the training and the background ... that ... allows that fluidity. When I was in grad school, I always had this feeling that I was kind of a jack of all trades and a master of none. And it was just funny because I was explaining this to someone recently and they said, but you have a PhD. I said, "yeah, I know," but there's something about my discipline in particular that allowed me to not necessarily specialize in one certain thing and feel as if I would be pigeonholed in that for my entire life. Because for me, like my vocation and being a community psychologist, it's rooted in community and so therefore it's fluid, it changes by the very nature of what the community needs and wants and aspires toward ... As a result of being in this work setting, I feel affirmed in that ... it requires a flexibility and adaptiveness that isn't so set in just one way of doing things or one content area. My strengths and my capacity are rooted in being fluid, adaptive.

Participant 132, a heterosexual white male who has a romantic partner and for whom spirituality is important, reflected on their new appreciation for and relationship to the field now that they were a lone CP,

It feels more like refuge, not that I need to escape, maybe refuge isn't the right word. Community psychology to me now feels more like a hobby that I get to embrace or visit on occasion, whereas, you know, in years past, I was just immersed in it. It's like, I get to take it out and look at it rather than be in it. I get to pull it out of my memory box. It's like a, a grandmother or something that I get to go visit on occasion instead of live with her. And those moments are more special, my being in community psychology, either through the conferences or meeting people, like former graduate student friends, where community psychology can be pretty salient, or maybe even talking explicitly about it, I savor it more, having had a little bit more of this distance in the past couple of years.

Eleven participants reflected on how CPs should be trained, often highlighting the importance of exposing trainees to the many diverse settings in which they might work (e.g., international settings; nonacademic settings), the diverse types of work they may and can do (e.g., government; nonprofit; consulting), and the diverse skillsets that they may need (e.g., navigating conflicts; working in environments where values are not shared). Ten participants also spoke about how their experiences as lone CPs in their work settings caused them to reflect on the field of community psychology overall. Several participants highlighted specific challenges that require attention,

such as thinking more intentionally about how to bridge the “gaps in between research and practice” (Participant 138); expanding the venues in which CPs do their work to include “rural areas” (Participant 101); becoming less “internally focused,” and instead identifying intersections with other disciplines and professions to make change (Participant 135); and renewing a commitment to “primary prevention” (Participant 133). For the most part, participants who reflected on the field discussed the need to keep it alive, and to think intentionally about how to diversify and grow the field. Participant 114, a married, white heterosexual mother who grew up in a Protestant church, and whose parents were both the first in their families to go to college, reflected on how their experience as a lone CP made clear that the field is important, and worth maintaining.

I think I have more of a sense of urgency about the field. We had a public health speaker come ... a couple of years ago, and I said, “I’m a community psychologist.” And he was like, “Oh, that field is dying.” And I was just shocked. And I thought, “well, surely you’re mistaken.” But I am aware ... how much some graduate programs are struggling. And I feel more of a sense of urgency about the field because I do think there are so many adjacent fields that are doing really good work, but I don’t think we could just be replaced by public health, or by education, or social work ... There’s something quite profound about the value base and orientation of community psychology that I really think it’s critically important ... It’s fragile in a way. I mean it’s very resilient. It has never been a well-resourced field, and we’ve always been underdogs in many ways. So there’s this incredible resilience but there’s also a real fragility. Training at the undergraduate and graduate level just seem critically important to me. I want to support that. I think that my identity over time has just gotten sort of stronger as a community psychologist because it does seem so critically important that we continue to grow and preserve it.

#### 4.8 | RQ 8: How could SCRA better support lone CPs?

Participants had several suggestions for how SCRA could support lone CPs. Table 1 presents participants’ specific suggestions, organized into general recommendations to (1) provide tangible support, (2) provide relational support, (3) change SCRA’s culture and priorities, and (4) improve undergraduate and graduate training in community psychology.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

CPs’ values and commitments call them to work in a wide array of diverse settings, where they can engage in the most meaningful and impactful community work (see Viola & Glantsman, 2017). This includes and extends beyond the academy, with more than half of CPs working outside of academia (van de Hoef et al., 2011; Viola & Glantsman, 2017). The relatively few community psychology graduate training programs result in relatively few CPs, and limited job opportunities within the academy (Society for Community Research and Action, 2022). As a result, CPs may often find themselves in a work setting (whether within or beyond academia) where they are the only CP. We set out to learn about lone CPs’ work experiences to identify additional support they may need to thrive in their current work setting, given that one’s sense of community and mattering at work has far-reaching impacts on many aspects of their lives (Boyd & Nowell, 2014; Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Garrett et al., 2017; Klein & D’Aunno, 1986; Prilleltensky, 2014, 2020; Stewart & Townley, 2020). As CPs, we are deeply invested in promoting the well-being of individuals and communities, including our own community of CPs. Our study is the first to examine empirically the work experiences of lone CPs. While its exploratory nature limits our ability to generalize

**TABLE 1** Interview participants' recommendation and specific suggestions for SCRA

| General recommendations  | Specific suggestions  |
|--|---|
| Provide more tangible support  |   |
| Provide (increased) funding and financial support  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <i>Mini-Grants and funding</i> to publish work and travel to conferences (<math>n = 5</math>).</li> </ul>  |
| Provide (more) training and professional development opportunities   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <i>skill-building and skill-sharing opportunities</i> for CPs to learn from each other and refresh their skills (<math>n = 5</math>).</li> <li>• Provide <i>mentoring</i> from more senior CPs (<math>n = 1</math>).</li> <li>• Catalog <i>resources that can be used to legitimize the work of CPs</i> (<math>n = 1</math>).</li> </ul>   |
| Improve the conferences  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <i>childcare accommodations</i> to increase accessibility (<math>n = 1</math>).</li> <li>• Prioritize sessions on <i>methods, skill-building, and that employ more rigorous designs</i> (<math>n = 1</math>).</li> <li>• Avoid <i>scheduling conflicts</i>, particularly in relation to other professional conferences CPs might attend (<math>n = 1</math>).</li> </ul>   |
| Provide more relational support  |   |
| Create (more) mechanisms for CPs to connect with one another outside of the listserv and in more personal ways | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <i>discussion forums and groups</i> to connect CPs who do similar work across settings (<math>n = 9</math>).</li> <li>• Create <i>CP directories</i> searchable by substantive area, geographical location, or type of setting (<math>n = 3</math>).</li> <li>• Host <i>local events</i> (<math>n = 3</math>) hosted or sponsored by SCRA across the country to allow CPs in different regions the opportunity to connect in person</li> </ul>           |
| Change SCRA's culture and priorities   |   |
| Expand SCRA's key audience   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support <i>international work and collaborations</i> (<math>n = 3</math>).</li> <li>• Introduce community psychology to and engage with <i>younger generations</i> (<math>n = 2</math>).</li> <li>• Market to and connect with <i>other disciplines</i> (<math>n = 2</math>).</li> </ul>   |
| Address the hierarchical structure of the organization and welcome different kinds of CPs                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage <i>CPs outside of research and academia</i>, through job board postings, leadership roles, or professional development/mentoring programs (<math>n = 5</math>).</li> <li>• Welcome <i>private sector practitioners</i> and CPs (<math>n = 3</math>).</li> <li>• Engage CPs with <i>different education/training levels</i> (<math>n = 2</math>).</li> <li>• <i>Recognize and attend to power hierarchies</i> within SCRA (<math>n = 1</math>).</li> </ul> |
| Improve community psychology undergraduate and graduate training   |   |
| Provide (more) opportunities for exposure to and training for jobs outside of academia                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <i>real world and practical skills training</i>, such as how to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration, how to build relationships with communities, how to communicate effectively, and business administration (<math>n = 6</math>).</li> <li>• Provide guidance on and exposure to the <i>variety of jobs outside of academia and research</i> (<math>n = 4</math>).</li> </ul>  |
| Provide (more) training on how to teach and mentor   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Embed community psychology values into the way we train CPs to teach and mentor others</i> (<math>n = 1</math>)</li> </ul>  |

Abbreviations: CP, community psychologist; SCRA, Society for Community Research and Action.

these findings to all lone CPs, the findings provide key insight into how SCRA can support all CPs. Because the participants themselves provided a detailed list of recommendations and suggestions for how SCRA may better support them, we use the discussion section to provide some of our research team's reflections and observations from this project.

First, value-based praxis is a cornerstone of community psychology, and a large part of what defines our work (Prilleltensky, 2001). It may be no surprise, then, that the answer to most all of our questions—What defines a CP? How do they choose where to work? What are the benefits to being a lone CP? What are the challenges?—was *values*. When describing why they identified as a CP, participants mentioned their training program, and the values and orientation of the field. When discussing what led them to accept their current work position, participants discussed the values of the organization, being able to work in a certain substantive area, or being able to have a certain impact. In explaining benefits to being the lone CP, participants described how they felt valued, that they mattered, and that the work was stronger because of the unique value orientation they brought to it. And when they encountered challenges or tension, it was most often due to value conflicts and differences in how to approach the work. In conducting and analyzing these interviews, we were struck with how often and consistently our CP colleagues discussed values like social justice, systems thinking, empirical grounding, communities as expert partners, centering those who are marginalized, and radical and critical thinking. Like Participant 132, when we engaged with these data, it felt like “home.” When work settings do not hold these same values, the organizational context may not meet the CP’s needs, and thus diminish their sense of community (e.g., see Nowell & Boyd, 2014). Because CPs are so intimately connected to their work through their value-based praxis, a compromised sense of community or mattering at work can have significant impacts on their lives. Participants in this study described feeling lonely, isolated, and exhausted when they were “the only one that cares about this stuff” (Participant 123). Thus, in exploring and putting to use the many detailed recommendations and suggestions provided by participants in Table 1, it seems critically important that all strategies developed to support lone CPs include an emphasis on validating, affirming, and providing additional tools to support value-based praxis, particularly when one’s work setting may call it into question.

Second, while more CPs work outside of academia than in it (see van de Hoef et al., 2011; Viola & Glantsman, 2017), community psychology practitioners continue to feel as though they are on the outside of SCRA looking in. As CPs who are currently employed within academia and conduct community-based work, the line between academic and practitioner was not as well-defined for us. However, this distinction was incredibly salient for CP practitioner interview participants who described feeling excluded or not as valued within SCRA because they were not academics. While SCRA may be making more intentional efforts to blur the line between those employed within and outside of academia, increased efforts are needed, as those who identify as CP practitioners continue to feel as though they are not valued to the same degree. Indeed, most of the participants’ recommendations and suggestions for changing SCRA’s culture and priorities focused on welcoming in different kinds of CPs.

Finally, we took what might be considered by some as a unique approach to engaging intersectionality in this project. We did not systematically collect specific demographics from all participants, but instead let participants define themselves, and then embraced the resulting complexity (most aligned with an intracategorical intersectional approach, see McCall, 2005). We also explicitly named systems of oppression in discussing intersectionality and cited and credited Black feminists for introducing and developing it. Too often, researchers reduce intersectionality to a notion of “intersecting identities,” failing to explicitly name and center the systems of oppression that should be our focus (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Additionally, researchers often name and engage intersectionality without understanding its history and crediting its creators. Members of our research team are working to be more intentional in our engagement of intersectionality. We invite our CP colleagues to do the same, and commit to its responsible stewardship (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017), even when it is not the primary focus of their study. In explicitly inviting participants to reflect on multiple aspects of who they are and how that impacted their experiences, we were able to gather richer, more complex descriptions and understanding of individuals’ lived experiences at specific intersections. It is important that future research examine further how intersecting systems of oppression and privilege provide and deny opportunities for CPs to thrive. It would be particularly important to explore these phenomena across the globe, as our sample was largely US-based, missing out on the opportunity to more fully examine the experiences of CPs outside of the United States.



## 6 | CONCLUSION

Since the inception of the field of community psychology, CPs have continuously reflected on our purpose. Our ability to question ourselves and our discipline is one of our strengths, as it means we refuse to become stagnant in a changing world that requires innovation, flexibility, humility, and resistance. In our interviews with lone CPs, we were affirmed in knowing who we are and the value of the work we do. Concerted efforts to ensure all CPs, across a wide array of diverse work settings, know they matter and feel a sense of community will enable us to do our best work and continue to strive toward liberation for all.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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