REVIEW

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What is a coalition? A systematic review of coalitions in community psychology

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Abstract

While community psychologists often work with coalitions, these entities engage in a wide range of activities and structures that are not well defined within the field. In this paper, we explore the following questions: (a) What are the characteristics of coalitions community psychologists study? (b) What are the themes in the way authors define coalitions in their work? To address these questions, we conducted a systematic review of articles about coalitions in journals serving community psychologists. Findings suggest coalitions in community psychology can be characterised by a focus on a wide variety of local level community issues and include a diverse group of stakeholders. Coalitions are defined by a focus on three types of coordination: knowledge coordination, negotiated coordination, and action coordination. These types of coordination are used to address specific problems coalitions encounter and define the goals and techniques appropriate for resolving them. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

KEYWORDS
action, coordination, coalition, collaborative, collective action, community psychology, coordination, knowledge coordination, negotiated coordination, systematic review community change

1 | INTRODUCTION

Coalitions have a long history in community psychology. As early as 1989, American community psychologists suggested coalitions could be a critical space for collective power in communities (Heller, 1989). Since then, the field

has seen scholarship addressing many aspects of coalitions, from their development to potential impacts on the individuals participating in them and the outcomes they achieve in the communities in which they operate (Anderson-Carpenter, Watson-Thompson, Chaney, & Jones, 2016; McMillan, Florin, Stevenson, Kerman, & Mitchell, 1995; Nelson, 1994). Coalitions' activities also fit with the values of community psychology as vehicles for empowerment, collective power and promotion of wellness in communities (Goodman, Wandersman, Chinman, Imm, & Morrissey, 1996; McMillan et al., 1995; Rappaport, 1977). While community psychologists often work with coalitions, these entities engage in a range of activities and structures that have not been well defined within the field. The present study illuminates the nature of these entities in terms of their characteristics and how community psychologists define them in their work. This will provide additional clarity about their place within the field of community psychology, enrich interdisciplinary conversations about coalitions and facilitate a discussion about future areas of exploration in the study of coalitions.

Coalitions are defined in a variety of ways in community psychology. We present several theoretical definitions here to demonstrate the ways in which coalitions are understood in the field. Chavis (2001) suggests they include participants with diverse interests, histories and power dynamics. They disperse resources among participating institutions to achieve common goals, establish a pretext of equality, and are inherently paradoxical due to the conflicts in individual and collective goals and accountability structures. Wolff (2001) defines them according to the following set of criteria:

> The coalition is composed of community members; it focuses mainly on local issues rather than national issues; it addresses community needs, building on community assets; it helps resolve community problems through collaboration; it is community-wide and has representatives from multiple sectors; it works on multiple issues; it is citizen influenced if not necessarily citizen driven; and it is a long term, not ad hoc, coalition (p. 166).

This definition differs from Chavis (2001) in its specification of who the participants are, the types of problems they address, and how they function. Himmelman (2001) defines them broadly, suggesting they are 'an organization of organizations working together for a common purpose' (p. 277). Others describe them in terms of the type of work they aim to achieve, suggesting.

> Coalitions are a commonplace approach to the pursuit of health-related structural change (Watson-Thompson, Fawcett, & Schultz, 2008), though are often used in communities as planning and coordinating bodies rather than as grassroots mobilization efforts and agents of social change. Coalitions are temporary or enduring collaborations among diverse individuals, organizations, and constituents who agree to work jointly toward a common goal (Miller, Reed, Francisco, Ellen, & the ATN 079 Protocol Team for the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions, 2012, pp. 2–3).

Each of these definitions differs in what they see as coalitions, and all share common elements. These include participation of a diverse group of stakeholders and collective work towards achieving common goals. As research on coalitions is pervasive, there are many definitions, as each author understands these entities differently.

Community psychologists study coalitions that address a range of issues, including youth violence, substance use, poverty reduction, and educational attainment, a feature that sets us apart from fields like public health, in which researchers also study coalitions, but focus on issues within the health domain in particular (Anderson-Carpenter et al., 2016; Bess, 2015; Evans, Rosen, Kesten, & Moore, 2014). Many coalitions studied in community psychology have also demonstrated successes in shifting the way collaborative work happens in communities and on key outcomes of community issues. Some examples include a coalition that fostered a variety of inter-organisational alliances (Foster-Fishman, Salem, Allen, & Fahrbach, 2001), another that reduced the rate of low infant birth weight (Darnell et al., 2013), and another that changed community policies and practices around youth binge drinking

(Anderson-Carpenter et al., 2016). However, there remain open questions about how coalitions can effectively act as mobilisers for change in community settings. There is room for empirical research to examine theories about how they operate (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001). For example, Chavis (2001) suggests coalitions' members must manage competing interests between the groups they represent and the coalition's overall agenda. In addition, coalitions can reinforce power structures, where large organisations are better able to participate than individual community members. As issues like this come up, it is essential to consider how coalitions operate and what functions they serve to generate processes that can achieve goals. Clarity about what this term means in community psychology can facilitate these broader conversations in the field about achieving outcomes and success with a consistent reference point.

Although there has been substantial empirical work in community psychology focused on coalitions and increasing calls for communities to take new approaches to collaborative work, there has not been an update to the definition of coalitions or a systematic assessment of what coalitions look like in practice. This topic was last brought into critical focus in a 2001 special issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. Since the publication of the special issue, and subsequent reviews addressing the coalitions literature have not focused on defining them or exploring this topic within the particular context of community psychology (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, et al., 2001; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006).

Researchers and practitioners in community psychology make suggestions about what coalitions can do for communities. For example, Bess (2015) suggests that they can be conceptualised as interventions to community systems. However, a specific understanding of what they look like in practice is critical for evaluating their role in community life and separating them from other similar entities like systems of care (Suarez, Belcher, Briggs, & Titus, 2012). Further, outside of the formal coalition literature in community psychology, others suggest processes for collaboration and coordination among stakeholders in communities (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2011; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Understanding what coalitions look like in practice can help unpack their fit with recent change strategies. To do this, it is important to clarify this type of community entity as its role may be changing, and as research about it moves in new directions.

In addition, 'coalition' is a commonly used term in other fields, including sociology (e.g., McGimpsey, Bradbury, & Santori, 2017), public administration (e.g., Meyfroodt, Desmidt, & Goeminne, 2017), and political science (e.g., Miller & Curtin, 2011). It is important to establish what this term means for Community Psychology to effectively communicate with other disciplines and contextualise coalitions research from other disciplines. Understanding how coalitions are understood to operate within community psychology can help identify relevant literature in other contexts that use different terminology to refer to similar types of groups. It can also help to identify the ways in which community psychologists may be more likely to work with some types of coalitions than others. Thus, this paper evaluates the ways in which community psychologists define coalitions in their work and describe the coalitions they work with.

Specifically, we ask two research questions: (a) What are the characteristics of coalitions community psychologists study? (b) What are the themes in the way authors define coalitions in their work? To answer these questions, we employ a systematic review approach, systematically searching for articles in community psychology including studies of coalitions, extracting data describing the coalitions under study and how the authors see coalitions. We use these data to compute descriptive statistics about the characteristics of coalitions and thematic analysis to evaluate how authors define them.

2 | METHODS

Our systematic review process parallels similar review papers in community psychology, like Devenish, Hooley, and Mellor (2017) and Neal and Neal (2017). The process begins with a determination of relevant sources to create a pool, an inclusion process to determine which articles are appropriate, and a data extraction process from the articles.

TABLE 1 List of journals and article counts

Journal	Initial article set	After inclusion coding	After full reading
American Journal of Community Psychology	82	34	19
Journal of Community Psychology	36	17	13
Community Psychology in Global Perspective	3	0	0
Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice	15	5	2
Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology	0	0	0
Journal of Rural Community Psychology	1	0	0
Australian Community Psychologist	7	1	0
Total	144	57	34

2.1 | Search process

We first established a pool of journals specifically serving the field of community psychology to search. To find community psychology-specific journals, we searched the Society for Community Research and Action's list of relevant journals for community psychology (SCRA, 2017). This generated a pool of seven journals: *The American Journal of Community Psychology*, *The Journal of Community Psychology*, *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*, *The Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, *The Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *The Journal of Rural Community Psychology*, and *The Australian Community Psychologist*. Although community psychologists also publish outside of community psychology journals, to focus on *how community psychology defines coalitions*, we selected journals where scholars would be speaking specifically from the community psychology perspective.

Next, we conducted electronic searches of each journal, looking for the term 'coalition' or 'collaborative' (when used as a noun, this is frequently used as a synonym for coalition in community psychology literature) in the title or abstract. We limited the keywords to the title and abstract to exclude articles only making a passing reference to coalitions. We also limited the articles to those written since 2000, narrowing the pool of articles to those written since *The American Journal of Community Psychology* published a special issue on coalitions, which may have influenced subsequent work in this area. See Table 1 for a list of the number of articles from each of the journals in the search process. This initial pool included 144 articles.

Next, each article in the pool was evaluated for inclusion criteria (see Table 1 for an overview of the inclusion process). To be included, the articles needed to (a) report that it was studying a coalition (or collaborative) and (b) be an empirical paper. The first two authors independently evaluated the title and abstract for each article for these criteria and came to consensus about any discrepancies in evaluations. Any articles for which the coders were unclear about inclusion criteria were retained and the full text was assessed for inclusion. This process yielded a pool of 57 articles. Four articles were excluded for not reporting an empirical study of a coalition, and an additional 83 were excluded because the study did not focus on coalitions. Finally, each of the coders read each included article to verify its inclusion. During this process, another six articles were removed because they did not have a focus on coalitions and 16 articles were removed because they did not include an *empirical* study of a coalition. Our final pool included 37 articles.

2.2 | Data extraction

Next, the same two coders extracted data from each article. Data extraction focused on two areas listed in the research questions: the characteristics of the coalitions being studied and how the authors defined coalitions. Data extracted to evaluate coalition characteristics included things like who participates in coalitions (i.e., community

members, organisational representatives, cross-sector participants), on what scale they do their work (i.e., local, state level, national, international), and what kind of work do they do (i.e., programme design, interventions, prevention, organisational networking). This approach follows the types of information commonly presented in coalition articles and is further informed by the types of information included in the common definitions included in the introduction. These data were highly structured because articles tended to present it in similar ways, fitting into pre-determined categories (see the Appendix for the data extraction codebook). We also extracted the definitions of coalitions presented in the articles. These were left open-ended during the extraction process, as they varied greatly in their content, and we wanted to be able to evaluate the themes among them. As such, we extracted direct quotes from the articles that included the author's definition. After training to establish a common understanding of the data points to be extracted, each coder independently read each article and recorded the relevant data points. Next, the coders met to discuss discrepancies and came to consensus on all data points from extraction. To analyse the data, we applied descriptive statistics to each of the data points we extracted with the exception of the definitions of coalitions presented in the articles.

To answer our second research question, we applied an inductive descriptive thematic analysis approach to the extracted data that defined coalitions and their functions. For this analysis, we employed the process found in Braun and Clarke (2006). We chose a thematic approach to analyse the latent content and theoretical importance of how authors were describing and defining coalitions. We chose an inductive approach to establish an understanding of coalitions that grows directly from the way community psychologists are thinking about this topic. Our analysis process started with in-depth reading and re-reading of the extracted definitions for common ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and organising these data into preliminary themes or groups (Tuckett, 2005). This open coding was systematic across all data extractions and involved tagging features of the data and collating by relevance to each code. These collated groups of codes were then read for and described as themes. Though each data extraction was coded independently, the themes were grouped across data extractions and checked for consistency in meaning by referring back to the individual context. We then created a thematic map of the coded data to analyse the content across and between major thematic areas. The result of this mapping is displayed in Table 3 in the 'Results' section.

3 | RESULTS

To assess the articles included in our pool, we present the results of our two types of analyses. First, we present descriptive statistics to discuss the characteristics of coalitions studied in the articles we included. Second, we present the thematic map representing how coalitions are described in articles to understand what role they serve and how they function.

3.1 | Coalition characteristics

To assess the first research question, we evaluate the characteristics of coalitions by discussing who participates, the scale on which they operate, the issues they address, and the approaches employed in their work. Using these characteristics, we establish a general understanding of what makes up a coalition. In the next section, we will further define coalitions based on what they do as entities in communities.

The articles demonstrated some trends in the scale of the work coalitions conduct and the people who comprise their membership. Thirty-three of the articles reviewed included coalitions working at the local level (97.10%), and two reported working at the state level (5.88%). None of the articles reviewed included coalitions working at the national or international level. The articles reported on a variety of participants, including community members (19, 55.88%), organisations or organisational representatives (28, 82.35%), and cross-sector representation, meaning they include individual or organisational representatives from multiple sectors (22, 64.71%). Although authors often

did not provide the exact ages of the coalitions, ages reported ranged from less than a year to 41 years. The full list of articles is included in Table 2.

The articles infrequently reported information about coalition governance or strategies guiding their work. Those reporting about formal strategies in their work were engaging in a few approaches: Communities that Care, Connect to Protect and the Strategic Prevention Framework. Each of these approaches suggests strategies for achieving impact, with process tools that may interact with decisions about governance. However, it is not clear from the articles reviewed what influence these strategies may have ultimately had on governance structures.

Coalitions in the included articles focused on several common issues. They most frequently dealt with issues relating to children, youth, and families (56.25%), including youth violence and maternal health. Seven articles (21.88%) reported about coalitions addressing issues related to general health and wellbeing and seven reported about substance use specifically (21.88%). Five articles discussed coalitions addressing HIV or sexual health issues (15.63%). Coalitions addressed violence and abuse in five articles (15.63%). Coalitions addressed several other issues in single articles, including autism, neighbourhood development, food systems issues, and poverty. These issues were not mutually exclusive and coalitions sometimes addressed multiple issues. These data suggest that a focus on local issues can characterise coalitions research in community psychology. They bring together a variety of stakeholders, often representing organisations, and frequently, including community members and representatives of multiple sectors.

3.2 | Definition analysis

To address our second research question, we analysed authors' definitions of coalitions as presented in the papers we reviewed. Specifically, we explored the references used in coalition definitions and identified three major themes through our thematic analysis. We describe the findings from each of these activities below and consider their potential as hypotheses for future empirical exploration in the discussion section.

3.2.1 | References

Many authors cited other research as support for their definition ($n = 23$). We found that authors in our sample rarely cited the same sources, with the two most cited references only appearing in three articles' definitions of coalitions. These included Butterfoss and Kegler (2002) and Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman (1993), neither of which were cited together

3.2.2 | Thematic map

We identified three major themes from our thematic analysis of coalition definitions from the review articles: knowledge coordination (KC), negotiated coordination (NC) and action coordination (AC). Definitions of coalitions described them as dealing with these types of coordination in terms of the problems they deal with, their techniques and the outcomes they work towards. These types of coordination may not be independent of each other and in our qualitative analysis; we identified definitions that suggest a hierarchical structure in which AC relies on NC, which in turn relies on KC. Their potential interdependence is explored further in the future directions section. Themes for each type of coordination are summarised in Table 3 below. We will unpack each of the types of coordination and offer examples from the articles we reviewed. We have italicised key components of the quotes we offer as examples to highlight essential concepts for each type of coordination.

TABLE 2 List of included articles

References	Reported participants	Scale	Primary issue
Anderson-Carpenter et al. (2016)	Organisationscross-sector	Local	Youth substance use
Anderson-Carpenter, Watson-Thompson, Jones, and Chaney (2017)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Youth substance use
Barile, Darnell, Erickson, and Weaver (2012)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Family wellbeing
Bauermeister, Pingel, Sirdenis, Andrzejewski, Gillard, and Harper (2017)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Reducing STIs
Bess (2015)	Organisationscross-sector	Local	Youth violence
Boydell and Volpe (2004)	Community members organisations	Local	Parenting
Brookman-Frazee, Stahmer, Lewis, Feder, and Reed (2012)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Infant/toddler autism
Cardazone, Sy, Chik, and Corlew (2014)	Community members organisations cross-sector	State	Child abuse and neglect
Chutuape, Muyeed, Willard, Greenberg, and Ellen (2014)	Organisationscross-sector	Local	HIV prevention, youth
Cox (2009)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Localstate	Domestic violence
Emshoff et al. (2007)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Child and family wellbeing
Evans et al. (2014)	Organisationscross-sector	Local	Poverty
Flewelling et al. (2005)	Organisations	Local	Youth substance use
Freedman and Bess (2011)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Food system issues
Fujimoto, Valente, and Pentz (2009)	NR	Local	Substance use
Harper, Kuperminc, Weaver, Emshoff, and Erickson (2014)	NR	Local	Child and family wellbeing
Hausman, Becker, and Brawer (2005)	Community members organisations	Local	Community health
Hausman, Siddons, and Becker (2000)	Community members organisations	Local	Community health
Humphreys, Macus, Stewart, and Oliva (2004)	Community members	Local	Self-help groups for health
Kovach, Becker, and Worley (2004)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Maternal and child health
Kuklinski, Hawkins, Plotnick, Abbott, and Reid (2013)	Organisations cross-sector	Local	Youth problem behaviours including substance use, delinquency, and violence
Miller, Reed, Francisco, Ellen,, and the ATN 079 Protocol Team for the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions (2012)	NR	Local	HIV exposure, youth

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

References	Reported participants	Scale	Primary issue
Nargiso et al. (2013)	NR	Local	Youth substance use
Nowell (2009a)	Organisations cross-sector	Local	Domestic violence
Nowell and Foster-Fishman (2011)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Domestic violence
Nowell and Boyd (2014)	Organisations	Local	Health and wellness
Riggs, Feinberg, and Greenberg (2002)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Youth problems
Shapiro, Oesterle, and Hawkins (2015)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	NR
Snell-johns, Imm, Wandersman, and Claypoole (2003)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	Substance use
Watson-Thompson et al. (2008)	Organisations	Local	Neighbourhood development, youth development,
Watson-Thompson, Woods, Schober, and Schultz (2014)	NR	Local	Youth substance use
Wells, Ward, Feinberg, and Alexander (2008)	Community members organisations	Local	Youth problems
Yang, Foster-fishman, and Collins (2012)	Organisations cross-sector	Local	Substance use
Ziff et al. (2010)	Community members organisations cross-sector	Local	HIV prevention, youth

Abbreviation: NR, not reported.

TABLE 3 Thematic map of coalition definitions; coalition function

	Knowledge coordination	Negotiated coordination	Action coordination
Types of problems	Each stakeholder has knowledge of different parts of the system	Stakeholders have disagreement about who is responsible for parts of the problem	Stakeholders are acting in ways that are not congruous and want to move toward congruous action
Techniques	Shared measurement or data collection processes, facilitated processes for sharing knowledge	Generate a governance structure capable of facilitating consensus processes	Provide services that cannot be implemented by individual members, generate policy agendas
Outcomes	Ongoing knowledge exchange, shared definitions of the problems the coalition works on	Come to consensus about shared resources and reducing redundancies in the coalition shared resources and reducing redundancy	Exercise shared voice, collective power and collective action

The first theme emerging from the papers' definitions of coalitions, KC, refers to the bringing together of stakeholder knowledge in a coalition. KC problems relate to the coalition participants each having unique knowledge of the system they are trying to change. Coalitions may set outcomes around KC by trying to achieve shared information systems for stakeholders allowing for ongoing knowledge exchange and common definitions of the problem the coalition addresses. To achieve KC outcomes, they can employ techniques to facilitate shared knowledge, like shared

measurement or facilitated data collection processes to capture information from all stakeholders and present it in accessible ways. Watson-Thompson et al. (2008) describe KC at a high level, suggesting that it is a precursor to solving problems and changing systems:

> Community coalitions provide enhanced resources for community members to *define* and solve problems with the potential to be powerful enabling systems for community change (p. 25).

Miller et al. (2012) additionally offer specific examples of processes for collecting and evaluating knowledge among coalition stakeholders and the community they work with, including:

> Environmental scan, analysing root causes of risk for adolescents in a defined geographic area, developing a logic model depicting local causes of risk, and formulating strategic plans and structural change objectives that are linked to the locally identified root causes of risk (p. 380).

The second theme emerging from the papers' definitions of coalitions, NC, refers to a coalition's structure and ability to achieve consensus. NC problems deal with the disagreements among stakeholders about ownership of various aspects of the problem and its solution. NC outcomes focus on coming to consensus about shared resources and reducing redundancies in the coalition. Techniques for achieving NC involve building governance structures that make it possible for stakeholders to deliberate about problems and make decisions for further action (described further in the coordinated action section below).

Outcomes related to NC include making decisions about generating shared resources, reducing redundancy in service provision and generating more efficient service systems. To make these decisions, coalitions employ techniques that facilitate consensus among stakeholders. The definitions also suggest a potential logical relationship between NC and KC in order for stakeholders to be able to evaluate the current state of the system. For example, Miller et al. (2012) define coalitions by their efforts towards establishing a common goal: 'Coalitions are temporary or enduring collaborations among diverse individuals, organizations, and constituents who agree to work jointly toward a *common goal*'. To establish common goals, stakeholders may require awareness of each other's understanding of how the problem operates within their context and the structure within which to agree about a goal.

> Wells et al. (2008) also describe this process in the coalitions they study:
> Each community's leaders form a 'prevention board' that undergoes training and then systematically assesses local risk and protective factors related to youth. They are then supposed to *prioritize problems*, *select one or more empirically based prevention programs*, and evaluate impact over time (p. 97).

The coalition boards employ the knowledge acquired from assessing risk and protective factors (KC) in order to set their priorities for action (NC). This example demonstrates the potential importance of the individuals who participate in sharing knowledge, as that information dictates how the group selects priorities.

The third theme emerging from papers' definitions of coalitions, AC refers to taking collective action as a coalition. To do this, the coalition often needs to first have KC and NC efforts in place. Problems related to AC focus on stakeholders acting in incongruous ways and wanting to move towards congruous action, where stakeholders establish and carry out actions as a group. Evans et al. (2014) discuss this in their definition of a coalition:

> Networks, coalitions, alliances and other forms of interorganizational collaboration are seen as more effective strategies for building power to affect the broader systems and policy change needed to reduce the causes of poverty. The basic assumption is that *an interorganizational coalition can mobilize and have a greater impact on change processes than could be achieved by organizations acting alone* (p. 358).

The authors describe how the action of a whole coalition can make change beyond the reach of any individual actor. This coordinated action often includes speaking with a shared voice and exercising collective power. To achieve these goals, they employ techniques like providing services as a group that cannot be managed by any individual stakeholder or generating policy briefs that each member of the group endorses. This type of coordination may logically build on the first two themes. To coordinate action, stakeholders may need to have some degree of coordinated knowledge to establish actions relevant to the group members and the community. They may also need to have NC to decide which actions to take, how to take them, and when. An in-practice example from Flewelling et al. (2005) describes the coalition they studied:

> Coalition coordinators worked with coalition members and community-based organizations to facilitate acceptance and *implementation of these practices and to increase overall attention and commitment to substance use prevention efforts in their communities* (p. 336).

In this example, the coalition uses its power as a group to increase efforts in their community. By using a collective voice, multiple stakeholders can reinforce a message throughout the community to enact changes no stakeholder could achieve individually.

4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to assess how community psychologists define coalitions in their empirical work. It builds on previous reviews related to coalitions by engaging recent literature with a broad community psychology focus in service of defining coalitions (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, et al., 2001; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). To that end, we asked two questions: (a) What are the characteristics of coalitions community psychologists study? (b) What are the themes in the way authors define coalitions in their work? Based on our answers to those questions, in this section, we propose a definition of coalitions and unpack each of the components of coalitions' coordination. Each type of coordination interacts with the descriptive findings to establish a complete definition of coalitions in community psychology. We conclude with future directions for this research area and describe the limitations of the current study.

The findings from these two lines of inquiry can be summarised with a focused definition of coalitions within the community psychology disciplinary context:

> Coalitions are groups working on community issues at the local level that include cross-sector representation of individuals and organizations. They often work toward prevention and coordination of stakeholders to address community-specific problems. They primarily engage in three types of coordination as a tool for change: knowledge coordination, negotiated coordination, and action coordination.

The authors' citation practices in their definitions of coalitions suggested that such a definition may be useful to the field because authors rarely cited the same sources to describe coalitions. The two multiply cited items did not include either of the previous review articles we identified about coalitions, suggesting that they may not be understood as definitional within the field.

4.1 | Knowledge coordination

Within KC, Miller et al. (2012) provide several strategies for bringing together knowledge. However, KC may only go as far as the stakeholders whose knowledge is ultimately included and valued. Research with similar

types of groups suggests that barriers can arise inhibiting KC. Stakeholders with critical knowledge may be left out of the coalition entirely or some stakeholders who are members of the coalition may be excluded from the group's KC activities. When stakeholders with key knowledge of the problem do not participate in KC, coalitions may coordinate the knowledge of all their participants, but may still not have the necessary knowledge to fully understand the problems the coalition will address. This exclusion can come from personal choice by stakeholders *or* by group norms preventing some participants from engaging fully (Gone, 2006; Watson & Foster-Fishman, 2012). A coalition consisting of only individuals with the same limited knowledge of the problem may not find the most benefit from engaging in KC efforts. Coalitions and researchers working with them must consider strategies for ensuring knowledgeable stakeholders are invited to participate. They may also consider which compositions of stakeholders lead to effective knowledge exchange to support other types of coordination.

4.2 | Negotiated coordination

The NC theme in authors' definitions of coalitions is surprising given the lack of discussion about coalition governance when authors described the coalitions they were studying empirically in their papers. While some authors described basic coalition structure and indicated they use strategies which may have implications for governance structure, like Communities that Care and Connect to Protect, they did not frequently discuss implications of these structures or how they were decided upon. The lack of information about governance in practice may suggest that this is an area, in which, we do not have institutionalised knowledge in the empirical literature. This may present an opportunity to learn from other fields researching governance, like institutional economics, organisational research and public administration (Jones, 2013; Milward & Provan, 2000; Ostrom, 1990).

4.3 | Action coordination

The potential relationship between AC, KC and NC seems particularly important for empirical follow-up based on suggestions from the current literature regarding coalitions. In situations where coalitions approach AC without some level of KC and NC, they may risk stakeholders taking conflicting actions. Findings from Nowell (2009a) and Nowell (2009b) posit the importance of KC as a precursor to action, suggesting that if a coalition wants to conduct systems change work; they will need to align stakeholder problem frames and work towards a shared philosophy. Thus, the negotiated decision to act around issues of systems change may require coalition members to return to the issue of KC. Stauss, Jackson, and Maxwell (2019) also reinforce this thinking in practical terms, suggesting leaders must organise meetings in such a way that there is both an opportunity for information sharing and decision-making to move to action.

4.4 | Limitations

These findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations stemming from article inclusion procedures. We limited the scope of articles for inclusion based on year and keywords. This is a matter of scoping as well as practicality in terms of assessing available information. However, there may be some articles that were not included because they use different terms to refer to coalitions. Additionally, some literature published by community psychologists may be located in journals not specific to the field. Similarly, we did not include unpublished work in this area, which means this review may exclude some perspectives from practitioners whose work may be located outside scholarly

journals, for example in evaluation reports. Although practitioner journals were included in the pool, they may not provide a comprehensive view of in-practice work with coalitions within the field. Finally, we selected the list of relevant journals from the Society for Community Research and Action's list of journals for community psychologists. While three of the seven included journals are global or non-United States focused, they were selected from a list provided by a US-based organisation and may underrepresent the common international journals. Future studies can build on my work by examining other potential terminology for referring to coalitions in community psychology, considering additional international journals, and expanding the literature pool to include the grey literature.

4.5 | Future directions

In addition to addressing these limitations, these findings suggest several areas for future research relating to our findings, including evaluating bias in the way community psychologists use the term 'coalition' and evaluating the utility of each type of coordination for achieving coalition outcomes. This paper focused specifically on establishing an understanding of coalitions within the community psychology context. This is a first step towards understanding how these entities in community psychology relate to the way others use the term. Future research can compare the characteristics identified here and the themes relating to coordination against the way other areas of study approach coalitions. This is critical for understanding relevant concepts and theories outside of community psychology that can improve work with coalitions inside the field. Future explorations may also consider how inter-organisational alliances, systems of care, coordinating councils, and coalitions represent similar approaches and if there are contextual differences that may set them apart (e.g., the types of issues coordinating councils focus on relative to the issues coalitions focus on).

Recognising that the three types of coordination emerging from our thematic analysis represent how coalitions are defined, a further inquiry into how these operate in practice can validate them beyond the conceptual space of coalition definitions. Future research can explore the extent to which these types of coordination are present in coalitions, and each coordination type can be treated as a hypothesis for how coalitions behave and tested empirically. These coordination types can be explored for interdependence and threshold effects, exploring the necessity of multiple kinds of coordination and the necessary levels of coordination for achieving outcomes. Exploring them over time can also demonstrate the role they play as a coalition develops and the extent to which they may be hierarchical or interdependent. Researchers can explore sub-groups of coalitions in future studies. Collecting data on a large sample of coalitions on many characteristics can allow for the assessment of sub-groups using cluster analysis or regression trees to determine how coalitions vary within this definition and identify the unique contexts related to variation among coalitions.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper's purpose was to assess the characteristics of coalitions being studied in community psychology and evaluate how they are currently being defined in the field. Our systematic review established that coalitions in community psychology tend to engage a variety of community stakeholders around issues at the local level. They also engage in three types of coordination in doing their work: KC, NC and AC. The types of coordination presented here are the primary defined functions of coalitions. They require a recognition of the interconnectedness of the coalition participants and the necessity of engaging them to achieve coalition goals. Future research should consider how these types of coordination operate in practice and how community psychologists can further support coalitions in achieving their goals.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data included in this manuscript are available upon request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Appendix. Code book

Variable Name	Description	Values
Reference	APA formatted reference	Open ended
Coalition Definition	How do the authors define coalitions in their literature review?	Open ended
Who participates? Community members	Who is involved in the coalition? Are they community members?	0 = no 1 = yes
Who participates? Organizations	Who is involved in the coalition? Are they organizations?	0 = no 1 = yes
Who participates? Cross-sector	Who is involved in the coalition? Are they cross-sector?	0 = no 1 = yes
What issue do they work on?	What is the topical focus of their work? E.g., substance abuse, youth violence, community development	Open ended
What kind of work do they do?	What do they do in regards to the topic they work on? E.g., prevention, program development/administration	Open ended
On what scale do they do the work? Local	Are they working at the local level?	0 = no 1 = yes
On what scale do they do the work? State	Are they working at the state level?	0 = no 1 = yes
On what scale do they do the work? National	Are they working at the national level?	0 = no 1 = yes
On what scale do they do the work? International	Are they working at the international level?	0 = no 1 = yes
How old was/were the coalitions at the time of publication?	How long has the coalition been around?	Number in years
How is it/are they governed?	What do they report on coalition governance? E.g., hub organization that coordinates coalition work	Open ended
Do they subscribe to a particular model of coalition functioning?	What model do they follow, if any? Eg., Strategic Prevention Framework, Communities That Care, Collective Impact	Open ended