

THEory into ACTION

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Community Psychology Values while Collaborating with Criminal Justice

Partners

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This piece will explore how to integrate a community psychology perspective and values into community-based research on criminal justice issues. Criminal justice reform has been growing as an issue of relevance to the field of community psychology. Topics such as gender-based violence (e.g., sexual assault, intimate partner violence), juvenile justice reform, and re-entry issues during a time of mass incarceration in the United States have been a focal areas of interest for decades among community psychologists. While these programs of research are fairly common across disciplines, the unique application of community psychology perspectives and values have tremendous potential to further leverage positive change in the criminal justice system. However, there are distinct strengths, challenges, tensions, and ethical considerations that must be considered when incorporating the explicit values that community psychologists adhere to when conducting community-based work in the criminal justice system. As such, we set out to understand, both anecdotally and through a roundtable at a national criminal justice conference, how and where the similarities and differences lie between the fields in both training and practice. We also call upon our fellow community psychologists engaged in community-based research and/or practice to continue a dialogue regarding how to best utilize our training

and values with our criminal justice partners.

Both authors have been able to collaborate directly with colleagues in the criminal justice system and we took the opportunity to reflect upon how these experiences accentuated or challenged our value sets and perspectives. One of the authors worked directly with a policy development committee to improve services provided by law enforcement to sexual assault survivors. The collaborative team included various stakeholders (the author serving as a subject matter expert) and involved regular meetings to write, discuss, and edit policy. In recalling this experience, it is clear that the role of “scientist,” “researcher,” or “expert” allowed for the author to hold a seat at the table, while the role of “community partner” allowed for the author to take an empathetic perspective towards some of the topics being discussed. As such, the value of empirical grounding felt of particular importance in this setting as the committee frequently requested the scientific perspective from the academic literature. This process truly highlighted how a combination of scientific neutrality and other community psychology values maximized the benefits of our training.

Our other author has worked with multiple juvenile and family court systems and detention facilities to use research as a way of directly informing practice and decision-making. These experiences highlighted the importance of collaboration with community partners and listening to the needs of the courts. The greatest successes were had when the court drove the projects: from assisting with the development of an action-oriented research agenda, helping develop protocols, and creating data-driven strategies to harness funding for services needed to improve the lives of youth and families involved with the system. Over time, these collaborations lead to a number of policy-focused studies. From this, it became clear that meeting the community where they were at and listening to their voices contributed to the most effective

results, both from research and practice perspectives.

In order to further explore these initial interpretations, we sought out the criminal justice perspective directly from those who have received training in criminal justice research and/or practice-focused careers. To achieve this goal, we organized a roundtable at a national criminal justice conference to discuss these topics. We described the following core values with our roundtable participants: 1) individual and family wellness; 2) sense of community; 3) respect for human diversity; 4) social justice; 5) citizen participation; 6) collaboration & community strengths; and 7) empirical grounding. We hoped to discuss which core values appeared to be most central and relatable to our colleagues, and which appeared to be at odds with criminal justice training. A small group of criminal justice scholars and practitioners participated in the roundtable discussion and it should be noted that it is possible that this group is in part reflective of the general interest in a discussion of values. By and large, the feedback we received was varied. The majority of our roundtable agreed that empirical grounding was of utmost importance to them. In addition, roundtable participants mentioned respect for human diversity, social justice, collaboration, and community strengths as additional values of interest. Our partners at the table felt strongly that community psychology values were not at odds with criminal justice scholarship and action. However, our sample was extremely limited by those interested in attending the session. In fact, one individual left the discussion immediately after the first mention of social justice. Overall, this experience led us to believe that many researchers and practitioners in the criminal justice community (although not all) share our core values. Based on this assumption, we have suggestions for further promotion of these values in sensitive and collaborative ways to our friends and colleagues who work in (or conduct research on) various parts of the criminal justice system.

First, we believe that exploring our ideas and assumptions regarding community psychology values and criminal justice scholarship merits further research. Looking at these topics through an empirical lens may allow for more successful collaborative partnerships between the fields of community psychology and criminal justice. We also recommend continued support and engagement of this research within community psychology. More specifically, we support the current efforts to develop a SCRA special interest group on criminal justice so that these topics may be explored with more depth and breadth. Third, we recommend community psychologists seek outside education through criminal justice and social work programs. Through this process, we encourage individuals to question whether their personal practice of community psychology is truly inclusive, and, if not, how to encourage inclusivity in their work. Next, we suggest bridging partnerships with like-minded organizations and collaborators. While many individuals across fields share our values, they do not always share a common language surrounding these values. Encouraging the use of a common language (e.g., community settings, social justice, empirical grounding) may improve communication, goal-setting, and overall effectiveness of projects. Finally, we would like to highlight the importance of simultaneous research and action. Often we view these topics as mutually exclusive and it is imperative that we correct this assumption. Not only is this practice central to the work of community psychologists (many academics find “practice” central to their work and many practitioners engage in research activities), but it also supports the work of criminal justice researchers and practitioners.

In sum, many community psychologists are engaged important action-oriented work on criminal justice issues. We would like to conclude with a call to action for the SCRA community to get involved in the newly developed criminal justice interest group, foster opportunities for

dialogue surrounding our core values (e.g., empirical grounding, respect for human diversity, social justice, collaboration) across disciplines, and, finally, encourage continued research and action that speaks to the lives of individuals impacted by the criminal justice system and those working on addressing these important topics.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.