

SCRA Community Psychology Practice Council

Community Psychology Practitioner Profiles Project

Shawn M. Bediako, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Job Title	Assistant Professor
Workplace	University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Location	Baltimore, Maryland
Email Address	bediako@umbc.edu
Website	
Professional Affiliations	Association of Black Psychologists American Psychological Association Society of Behavioral Medicine Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues Society for the Analysis of African American Public Health Issues American Public Health Association; Emerging Scholars Interdisciplinary Network

Please describe the work you do, for pay, as a community psychologist, including the setting(s) where you work?

In my primary work, I am an assistant professor of psychology in the Human Services Psychology program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. I teach and supervise students whose interests are in behavioral medicine or community and applied social psychology. I also conduct research on adults' psychosocial adjustment to sickle cell disease (a genetic blood disorder) and engage in advocacy activities to bring awareness to the need for comprehensive services for this population.

What training/education do you have in community psychology?

Florida A&M's community psychology program is unique in that it emphasizes what could be considered systems theory - but is explicitly African-centered in its approach. So, I not only was well-versed in traditional theories and concepts, but the program also challenged me to think about how to implement these theories and concepts in novel ways that respected the historical and cultural contexts in which they were being implemented. So I graduated from FAMU with a rather advanced skill set in seeing problems through multiple lenses and from different vantage points. Through some rather creative externship opportunities (mine was split between the Tallahassee Department of Health and the Center for Health Sciences at the University of Yaounde in Cameroon, for example), I was able to put those skills to use and observe how public health intersected with community psychology. I think this experience really underscored for me how important it is to understand the various segments of communities and find areas of common interest in order to maximize the effectiveness of programs and services.

Please describe how your training/education contributed to your work as a community psychologist. What do you view as the most important skills you learned in your training as a community psychologist.

I received a master's degree in community psychology from Florida A&M University before going on to earn my doctorate in social/health psychology from Stony Brook University. In terms of preparation, of course I would credit the wonderful teachers and advisors I've had who taught me by example why it is important to use my scholarly abilities to help others. However, I think the greatest influence has been observing how my father (a history/government teacher who became a full-time minister) integrated a social justice and empowerment component into his ministry. Unbeknownst to me during my formative years, I was observing firsthand many of the principles of community organizing and community psychology through the church in rural southern Arkansas that I would later come to read about in graduate school. These early formative experiences have had a profound impact on my desire to conduct meaningful research that serves communities and seeks to improve people's quality of life.

What other experiences or training have contributed to or enhanced your ability to work as a community psychologist?

In 2008, I was the only social scientist appointed by Governor Martin O'Malley to the Steering Committee on Comprehensive Services for Adults with Sickle Cell Disease. This steering committee brought together persons directly affected by sickle cell disease, their families, physicians, health care administrators, insurance companies, public health officials, nurses, social workers, and laypersons. With such a broad range of stakeholders - and each with very different, yet important objectives - it was a challenge to map out priorities and develop a coherent agenda. I consulted my

community psychology textbooks quite a bit in preparing for our committee meetings and they've proven quite helpful. I've learned a lot from this particular experience about how to "build" community and more importantly, how to respect various voices and transform them into a viable choir.

Are there other ways you use your community psychology background and training, either unpaid or in paid roles other than your primary work?

As a community psychologist, I participate in both paid and volunteer work. I have been a paid consultant on a variety of projects undertaken by businesses or community-based organizations to promote health and well being in underserved communities. For example, I used my knowledge of community/social psychology to help a company design a campaign to educate individuals who get regular blood transfusions about the dangers of iron overload. I also helped an auxiliary group of a state health department develop its public health strategy for increasing awareness of and knowledge about sickle cell disease and sickle cell trait. Over the past five years, I have also volunteered with several empowerment groups in the Washington, DC metropolitan area on issues ranging from manhood development to unemployment to dietary behavior.

What advice might you give to students or people considering community psychology as a career?

There is so much advice that can be given...this is a really tough question. Of course, you should immerse yourself in the discipline, connect with mentors, peers, and colleagues, and share what you learn and know with others. But the greatest piece of advice I could give to aspiring community psychologists is to obtain clarity of purpose for why you are doing what you do. At the end of my day, it's not about grants, publications, media appearances, or how many people know me (although those are some of the perks of the "business"), but it's about asking myself the question, "Have I done something productive to help inspire change in somebody's life?" This clarity of purpose keeps me motivated.

Is there anything else you would like to say about your role as a community psychology practitioner?

I am proud to be both a community psychologist and an applied social/health psychologist. I love the work I do and respect the colleagues and populations with whom I work. I hope that others can find the same type of fulfillment, zeal, and enthusiasm in their chosen career paths.