

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

August, 2015

Facilitating Engagement in Our Communities

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Little Free Libraries are the product of a nonprofit organization aptly titled Little Free Library that seeks to provide everyone easy access to books. Their mission is “*to promote literacy and the love of reading by building free book exchanges worldwide and to build a sense of community as we share skills, creativity and wisdom across generations*”. Initially, the organization set out to exceed the number of libraries built by Carnegie (2,509) and has done so by leaps and bounds. A Little Free Library (LFL) is a small structure, typically placed in the front yard of a home or business, containing used books spanning a variety of genres and age groups. The idea is simple “Take a Book, Return a Book.” (see website for more information: <http://littlefreelibrary.org/>)

Little Free Libraries have the potential to (1) help community practitioners engage in their own communities and (2) to facilitate engagement in the communities within which practitioners work. As a community psychologist and practitioner, I have found Little Free Libraries as a way to engage with my community outside of the work environment. Many of us work within the realm of community engagement every day, helping others find their place and connection in the world. However, what do we do in our own neighborhoods? Does our own engagement as community psychologists stop when we leave the office? Little Free Libraries are an avenue for involvement within our neighborhoods, while also espousing the competencies and values of Community Psychology. They are also both an engagement and a literacy tool to be used by community practitioners to help others improve their communities and potentially improve educational outcomes through access to literacy. As John McKnight has stated, Little Free Libraries are an easy and accessible intervention because they do not require a lot of effort or resources (Aldrich, 2015).

Little Free Libraries (LFL) have a natural connection to many of the Community Psychology competencies as outlined by the Society for Community Research and Action. The following provides examples of these connections (SCRA, n.d.).

- **Sociocultural and Cross Cultural Competence:** The LFL helps us to get to know other cultures through books. You can learn about others’ reading preferences and sometimes worldviews through what they take and leave from the library; however, this knowledge can really only be acquired by combining the library with actual discussion (either online or in person).
- **Community Inclusion and Partnership:** LFLs are an easy way to include others in neighborhood initiatives. For the library to function, residents need to come together to supply the books and use the library. The library provides a passive way for residents to become involved. Anyone can take or leave a book without judgement or sometimes even notice.

- **Resource Development:** The collaborative nature of this project requires you to involve the resources of others. This project often takes more than your own resources to be successful. You must rely on others to leave or donate books in order to keep a rotating, fresh supply for the avid readers in the neighborhood. Once they see a lack of turnover in books, what will keep them returning?
- **Program Development, Implementation, and Maintenance:** This might be the simplest competency of all to practice. LFLs are programs in and of themselves. You can flex your program management muscles through the planning, building, placement, maintenance, and even evaluation of your own small library.

Little Free Libraries also help us live out one of our greatest values as community psychologists, that of building a sense of community. As we know, Sarason (1974) proposed that sense of community was the core to our field. Indeed, this is the entire focus of the Little Free Library initiative. It is a way for residents to get to know one another, grow a sense of belonging and connection, and rely on one another, even if only for reading material. The newly published Little Free Library Book (Aldrich, 2015) sheds light on this outcome. Stories of LFLs across the world show how they have helped neighbors get to know one another and develop a connection. The book outlines “Building Community” as an essential use of the libraries.

Little Free Libraries have great potential for our work as community practitioners, not only because of their inherent connection to community psychology principles and practices but because of their associated outcomes for the individuals and the communities in which we work. Through their exchange of resources (books), LFLs help neighbors connect, facilitate a love of reading, make books more accessible, serve as a common space and an anchor to other community activities, demonstrate creativity and innovation, and ultimately build social capital (Aldrich, 2015). They also have the opportunity to build neighborhood leadership. As Todd Bol, the founder of Little Free Library, says of library stewards, “they are the perfect concerned citizens, ready to pick up the charge, improve their neighborhoods, and ensure that all their neighbors read well and often” (Aldrich, 2015 p. 2)

Beyond being a tool in our community practice arsenal, I would argue that Little Free Libraries are also a way for community psychologists and community practitioners to engage with our own neighbors and practice what we preach. As we work day in and day out as practicing community psychologists, helping others to find their voice, work together to solve community problems, and improve quality of life, what do we do for our own personal growth and development within the realm of engagement? I propose that Little Free Libraries are one way that we can serve as role models of the principles of community psychology in our own life.

This is what Little Free Libraries have done for me as a community practitioner. A few years ago, we purchased a house in a neighborhood that was just getting started with its organization. A group of interested residents were in the process of setting up a community watch, there were discussions of reopening a park that had been closed, and a neighbor had started to organize regular neighborhood gatherings. Community engagement is my passion and my work, but with an incredibly demanding schedule at work, I found it difficult to find the time, and quite frankly the energy to engage with my neighbors as fully as I wanted. However, the Little Free Library provided an answer. It was a resource I could provide my neighborhood and became a way to start conversations with my neighbors. Our house

became known as the one with the little book exchange in front of it. When meeting new neighbors that was the only defining feature I needed to mention to explain where our house was positioned in the neighborhood.

Once we moved cross country and settled into our new home, it was time for the Little Free Library to once again work its magic and help me get to know my neighbors. As my husband and I worked to level a small patch of land in our yard and place the cinder blocks as a base, our neighbors took notice. Almost immediately our neighbor to the right came out to see what we were doing, which initiated a conversation. Another neighbor across the street brought over her toddler grandson to take a peek. In the evening when I return home from work I find people walking with their dogs and those pushing strollers searching for that next great read. I should mention that our neighborhood does contain other Little Free Libraries, so some people are accustomed to their presence and understand their purpose. However, our library has given us an opportunity to teach the occasional passerby about this common good. These interactions are not unique to our library. There are countless stories of this same phenomenon occurring in neighborhoods around the world (Aldrich, 2015).

In all, my Little Free Libraries have helped me to meet new people, provide a resource to my neighbors, generally observe neighborhood behaviors, and build my own sense of community. Through the two libraries that we have placed in our yards, I have witnessed first-hand what they can do for me as a practitioner and how practitioners working in other communities may help others utilize Little Free Libraries as an engagement tool. I don't pretend to claim that Little Free Libraries will change the world, but they may in fact add to the quality of life of neighborhoods, help build relationships with neighbors, and provide a venue for you to live community psychology practice at home.

References:

Aldrich, M. (2015). *Little free library book: Take a book, return a book*. Coffee House Press.

Sarason, S. B. (1974). *The psychological sense of community: Prospects for a community psychology*. Jossey-Bass.

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