



Sustaining oneself in community work: three key aspects

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Although I'm still early in career, there are three key aspects that are imperative for me in my work with communities; mapping the system I'm working in, understanding how work at different levels and on varying time frames require different types of energy, and taking time to reflect.

I still remember the first time someone on my caseload died from a drug overdose. I had worked with this young adult for only a few months before they left the substance abuse facility. One of my coworkers called me and broke the news. Although I had been through various trainings, nothing had prepared me for that feeling. Words don't quiet do the feeling justice, but it was a complex mix of emotions. While I knew this person's decisions were their own, I couldn't help but asked myself what I could have done differently or what signs I missed that could have given way to some sage wisdom I didn't provide. In the years following that first encounter with the reality of substance abuse work, I've learned a great deal about myself and how I sustain myself without burning out.

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Community work can be complicated. In order to better understand where my work falls within a community and how I can best

have an impact, I do my best to develop an understanding of the various forces at work. Christens and Perkins' (2008) "comprehensive ecological model for community research and action", which merges two other models, provides a starting place for me to understand the relationships and connections within a community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Prilleltensky, 2008). This particular model helps me understand just how complex community psychology work is by mapping how different system levels (i.e. individuals, families, institutions, nations) are differently affected by the physical environment, financial structures, societal norms, and policy guidelines over time moving towards community wellness. I appreciate this model in particular because it helps better understand the interactions between the different levels, different sectors, and time by eliciting a vision for what could be. While Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Prilleltensky's (2008) models remain foundational for me, this combined model allows to me build upon them in new ways. A conversation I often find myself in with others is how medication-assisted-treatment may help with an individual's abstinence but by itself does not address the institutional stressors like work-life balance or past trauma that often contribute to drug use. There is rarely a single solution for any

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challenge in a community but having an understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality within a community enables me to have a more holistic view of community work. Now, when I think back to that first call, I don't blame myself but instead I see how I am a part of a larger system and look for ways to better understand the whole picture.

“Those daily wins don't change the laws that stigmatize people convicted of drug crimes”

With a more complete view, I am then able to pursue work that is both personally fulfilling and works towards social justice. Still, I have experienced a tension between working on individual levels and working on policy levels. For example, in my work in substance use, successes like landing a job, staying clean for twenty-four hours, or reconnecting with a loved one all deserve to be celebrated, but those wins in themselves do not alter the larger systemic forces that often hinder recovery. Those daily wins don't change the laws that stigmatize people convicted of drug crimes. This tension calls for the development of a skill called the “metabolic balance between patience and zeal” articulated by James Kelly (Kelly, 1971). This ability to balance requires a community psychologist to recognize whether a situation calls for an energetic push for a short-term goal or the patience required for long-term achievements (Kelly, 1971). Within my own experience, zeal could be seen in the celebration and encouragement in helping an individual with criminal convictions apply for meaningful employment. Patience, however, is required in realizing that systemic/policy change takes a sustained and consistent effort over a much longer period of time. One example of this idea is that Ban the Box campaign, which challenges the status quo of routinely asking job applicants about their

criminal history. Since its founding in 2003, it has seen numerous successful policy adoptions and continues to work towards nationwide policy change in employment practices (Ban the Box n.d.). This skill contributes to my ability to sustain my own energy and health and allows me to better help my communities.

When I'm utilizing this ability, I'm more realistic in both my conceptions of what is achievable in the short term, landing a job or staying clean, and what will take patience to accomplish. An example that comes to mind is a conversation I had with a community member who had recently celebrated 6 months clean. That person was reflecting on their perseverance in their recovery and work life that resulted in clean time and a new job. They had stated that if only other people would put in the effort they too would be able to achieve the same outcomes. While I shared in their excitement and honored their dedication, I also saw this an opportunity to advocate and be reminded of the systemic barriers others face. Our conversation shifted to oppressive structural forces like racism and ableism that they personally had not encountered but saw how others had. I remember parting ways and feeling fueled by that person's milestones, their willingness to discuss systemic forces, and the reminder that I strive for my work to incorporate both the individual and the larger systems in hope for positive social change. The ability to balance this tension is difficult and often fluctuates, but the rewards for understanding this skill and practicing it helps me stay centered and present in my work.

“The reflection piece of my community work allows me to not only stay grounded, but it allows me to consistently reassess my recent work, the balance in my life, and the progress towards my goal.”

Finally, I would not be able to do community work without taking time to reflect. My experience has shown me that the work of a community psychologist or anyone working with communities can involve long, trying hours. The benefit of taking time to reflect is truly invaluable. Setting aside this time allows me to ground myself and also check in with the direction in which I'm heading. This often comes in the form of meditation, writing, and reaching out to my support network. I write about the strong emotions that my work evokes and I often meditate to find clarity through my overthinking, worrying, or stress. One of the most helpful things about my support network is their ability to listen. There have been countless times that I called a colleague and their active listening helped me express and articulate what I was feeling with suggestions on how to find a lesson in the struggle. Reflecting with my support network also allows me and my network to mutually gain insights that we would not find otherwise. Because communities and people are dynamic, I find great value in also asking larger questions. These questions often include are we truly helping communities, are we staying in line with our values and mission, and are we actively working towards social justice. This aspect of my reflection would be incomplete without the input of others. I had one valuable reflective experience with a colleague that revolved around the payment system for a substance abuse recovery program I was assisting with. Although I had strong relationships with both members and staff, I felt that the financial requirements were such that the program did not align with my value for equity and social justice. The transition was difficult, but the reflection with my support network allowed me to answer broader questions about my work which ultimately allowed me to realign my work with my values. The reflection piece

of my community work allows me to not only stay grounded, but it allows me to consistently reassess my recent work, the balance in my life, and the progress towards my goals. Saul Alinsky (1971) proposed going as far as going to jail for short periods because it gives one time to reflect and synthesize thoughts. While I don't recommend getting arrested as a means to reflect, I have found that I am much more at peace and present when I do schedule time for reflection.

There have been moments in my work that have been unbelievably trying and other times that have been incredibly joyful. Something I continue to realize with working in communities is that those ups, and downs contribute to my personal growth. Similarly, my observations and experience have shown that communities also have those growing moments. What I try to remind myself of is that through understanding the systems I'm in, practicing my skills to balance, and taking time to reflect, I am much happier and better able to show up for others in my communities.

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Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Kayla DeCant at kayladecant@gmail.com