



A Community Psychology at Heart: The Value of a Foundation in Community Psychology

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I first learned of community psychology through a bathroom stall at a women's networking and leadership event in college. I had struck up a conversation with a faculty attendee on the way out of the event, and as we were both headed to the restroom, we continued our conversation, (quite awkwardly), through the stalls. "You need to meet my officemate, he's a community psychologist." How had I not heard of community psychology? The field was a perfect blend of my interests and experiences, while embodying everything I valued: the opportunity to go beyond individual change to focus on systemic injustice, sociopolitical action, and creating more macro-level societal change. I was overwhelmed with excitement about the prospect of pursuing a career in the field.

From there, my journey as a burgeoning community psychologist was off to a wonderful start. "The Officemate," turned out to be Dr. Brad Olson, a well-respected community psychologist highly active in SCRA, who evolved into a mentor for me. I will always be grateful for his efforts to truly go above and beyond, providing invaluable mentoring through countless meetings, as well as connecting me to other colleagues and opportunities for data analyses and collaborations for conference presentations. He mentored me through my first submissions to the Midwest ECO and SCRA Biennial conferences, and soon after, through the application process to clinical/community doctoral programs. In graduate school at DePaul's Clinical/Community program years later, I

was engaged in research I was passionate about, attending conferences and networking with well-respected researchers in the field, and studying with community psychology-focused peers in my cohort.

Going into my fourth year of graduate school, everything changed. In soliciting a mentor's thoughts on where to consider applying for clinical externship for the following year, my interest in testing from my experiences in DePaul's in-house, child/family community clinic came up. She recommended I consider applying for a formal neuropsychology clinical externship, and try out neuropsychological testing. It ultimately was a quick courtship, and I quickly fell in love with neuropsychology. Each case felt like solving a puzzle. I loved the ability to not only use my analytical skills for case conceptualization and data interpretation, but also my clinical/interpersonal skills throughout testing and again during feedback, as well as my community psychology skills to think how to better connect patients to local resources that may best support their unique needs. The questions began soon after. Could I carve a more formal neuropsychology trajectory for myself this late in my graduate career, and given my community psychology background? Would I be competitive for clinical internship and post-doc matches? The challenges became more intense during the internship application and interview process, where I faced many curious (and at times, confused) interviewers who inquired about my switch from community to neuropsychology. I did my best to build a

cohesive narrative to tell the story of my journey, while highlighting the unique strengths I felt I brought from my training in community psychology. Although it may not have felt that way while I was navigating my transition (and in particular, the clinical internship process), my journey was not a unique one.

Many students in community psychology (and I would imagine across other disciplines within psychology as well), find during graduate school a passion for another subspecialty within psychology, and attempt to make a similar transition. In writing this piece, I was fortunate enough to connect with other community psychologists who also made the transition to neuropsychology. Although at different career stages, they shared stories of their individual journeys, and the value of having a strong community psychology background and supportive mentors as they transitioned to a new subsdiscipline.

I spoke with Dr. Darrin Aase, a graduate of DePaul's clinical-community psychology Ph.D. program. He transitioned into a career as an academic and clinical neuropsychologist, focused on the study of addiction treatment, and working as a tenure-track professor and as a co-investigator on multiple VA-funded studies of post-9/11 Veterans. He indicated, "One of the core tenets of community psychology is a focus on multiple levels of analysis, and on interdisciplinary cooperation. These also happen to be important skill sets for a neuropsychologist to function effectively." Dr. Aase noted that he has retained his identity as a clinical-community psychologist, and that his research career has focused on combining his interests in group-level addiction treatment processes with cognitive phenomena that occur during early recovery from alcohol use disorder. He indicated that, "the skills that you learn as a clinical-community psychologist translate well to a variety of settings. I believe that I am a better neuropsychologist and a better researcher

because of my community psychology skills and values." Dr. Aase noted that his passion for exploring new territory was in part cultivated by supportive community psychology mentors, such as Dr. Leonard Jason, who value diverse perspectives and their contributions to community psychology.

Linda Ruiz, a DePaul clinical-community student who recently matched a pre-doctoral internship in neuropsychology, shared her experience fresh off the internship application and interview process. She highlighted how most students applying to neuropsychology-focused internships have come from doctoral programs with a neuropsychology-specific track, which afforded the opportunity for specialized training and research experiences in the field. Linda stressed that, "While I was able to gain access to this information via practicum didactics, presenting at conferences, self-study, etc., I felt added pressure to demonstrate [on internship interviews] that I had sufficient content knowledge to be successful at the internship level." She highlighted that she found it extremely helpful to build strong relationships with supervisors and potential mentors within the field, which paved the way for strong recommendations that supported clinical internship interviews, despite the fact that she did not come from a neuropsychology-training program. She also stressed the importance of networking with peers, particularly from externships in your new field, joining professional organizations, and attending conferences to help to get to know both the professional landscape and to gain inside information that may not be available from a community-focused graduate program. Notably; however, strong, supportive mentoring may be one way to help with such a transition, and help provide insights and a more nuanced understanding of the unique strengths that you may bring as a community psychologist to any discipline.

Dr. David Meyerson, a DePaul clinical-child graduate, and now practicing

neuropsychologist, spoke to how his community psychology training positively influences his clinical practice, particularly related to how he conceptualizes patients. He noted, at times, a tendency for many clinicians to ignore the larger contexts (e.g., social, cultural) and systems patients are embedded. Dr. Meyerson cited Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, noting he frequently applies this community psychology-based theory to his clinical practice as a neuropsychologist, "I spend a lot of time, searching for data about a child to understand all of the contextual forces on this child at this time, to better understand why this behavior is occurring." Dr. Meyerson described how his community psychology background helped him to better understand and appreciate how the neurocircuitry of the brain can change based on an individual's environment. As a graduate student in thinking about future career options, Dr. Meyerson advised that it is OK if your new direction, whether it be neuropsychology or another discipline, does not focus on community psychology. First at foremost, the skills acquired from training as a community psychologist can be a significant asset across disciplines, but there are also many ways use your community psychology skills to be involved in local communities and to support social change outside of one's career. In addition, Dr. Meyerson noted that although graduate school trains you to juggle being a "jack of all trades," (e.g., teaching, conducting research/program evaluations, working with patients/clients), that as you grow in your career, you do not need to do everything you

are trained to do, all at once. If the skills, knowledge, tools and experience from your background as a community psychologist do not directly inform your work now in your new field, they very well may in the future.

Overall, community psychology is a versatile discipline that has much to offer. Students are encouraged to take care not to overly stress if they find themselves in a position where they also become intrigued by another sub-discipline within psychology. Mentors can serve as an invaluable resource for support across various stages of both graduate school and professional careers, for those who ultimately decide to make the transition from community psychology to another discipline or subspecialty area within psychology. Mentors may also help to normalize this process, as across subdisciplines of psychology, it is completely normal and not uncommon for students to decide to re-specialize at various points throughout graduate school, internship and post-doctoral fellowships. Community psychologists in particular have unique training, skills and experiences that can serve as invaluable assets upon transitioning to other disciplines. Mentors may also serve to help students and early career professionals become aware of their individual strengths from their background in community psychology, and provide crucial support for what can be a stressful and challenging transition.

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