

SCRA Community Psychology Practice Council

Community Psychology Practitioner Profiles Project

Jim Cook, Ph. D.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Job Title	Professor of Psychology; SCRA President
Workplace	Psychology Department, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Location	Charlotte, North Carolina
Email Address	jcook@uncc.edu
Website	None
Professional Affiliations	Society for Community Research and Action (APA Division 27)

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

I've been a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for over 30 years. As a faculty member, I've spent much of my time working with communities to help develop their capacity to meet the needs of their members. This has included work to organize low-income, minority communities, including public housing communities, develop continua of care for homeless services, evaluate and transform major children's mental health initiatives (systems of care), evaluate and improve family support programs within mental health and child protective services systems, to improve school readiness, and to evaluate and improve service delivery within public housing communities. This work has been funded through a number of sources, and has included many graduate and undergraduate students working with me and my colleagues on these projects. Most of the work has been community based participatory

research, in which we've helped build capacity for evaluation within organizations, so they can use data about the services they provide and the outcomes they achieve to improve their ability to serve individual adults, children and families. Closely related to all of the work mentioned above is teaching community psychology at a graduate and occasionally at an undergraduate level, and program evaluation/applied research. I've also worked within the university to help it expand its ability to engage students in the community in a variety of ways, so students can gain experience and communities can benefit from them as resources. Virtually all I do as part of my faculty role engages the community and works to effect community change. In addition, I do a small amount of consulting work, with community groups or national organizations, to help effect community change.

What training/education do you have in community psychology?

I received my Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Indiana University. I worked with Ken Heller there, and then did an internship that had great flexibility and some community emphasis at Western Missouri Mental Health Center in Kansas City.

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 think applied problem solving/research skills are the most critical aspects of my work and that were clearly part of my training. I think that much of the training I received was "foundational", in the sense of providing a set of skills about how to approach problems and communities, how to conceptualize ways of to effect change, and how to apply a set of applied research skills to community problems. Much of the work I do involves finding ways to connect dots, and finding ways to help people see connections between what they do or what they can do and the outcomes they desire. I think training in psychology helps us see the connections; training in community psychology helps us see the connections to a range of contextual factors that most psychologists don't even see, let alone consider as objects of intervention. Applied research skills are critical, since they help us assess and promote change through a better understanding of what is being done and how that is or is not making a difference; I also think that community organizing is a critical framework and skill for pulling people together to effect change.

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

The experience of working in the community, paid and unpaid, has been invaluable. Working with neighborhood groups, middle class and low-income, with advocacy groups and nonprofit organizations, has helped me regularly use skills and develop them more fully. It has also helped me see from many other peoples' perspectives. In sum, almost

everything I do is part of gaining experience to better work as a community psychologist.

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

It's really central to all I do. We host a neighborhood get together in my neighborhood every year, as a way of helping maintain community in my small, aging neighborhood. Fortunately, as a faculty member I have the luxury of becoming engaged in multiple community efforts, that count (very little) as "service" in our university reward structure, or as "teaching" when students are involved. Some of these evolve into funded research projects - others don't, but build connections, help create opportunities for doing other things with good community partners.

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

Get engaged in your community in ways that seem interesting. Find opportunities to use your skills and talents to improve your community. From this, figure out what you really like doing and learn to do it very, very well. Take some risks as a student, trying new things, because they really cost little as a student. Embrace ambiguity in tasks and in jobs, because when you go into a job or into a task that is ambiguous, you have the opportunity to define what you think needs to be done, based on the training and experience you have.

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

As an academic practitioner, I have many opportunities to use my position as a faculty member to practice community psychology, through applied research activities, supervising student projects, working with community agencies to develop programs and interventions and to effect changes that can then be evaluated.