The Problem

As of 2012, 15.9 percent of Americans (or 48.8 million) were living in poverty (U.S. Census, 2013). Poverty and lack of resources in communities greatly affect poor and middle class individuals in both rural and urban environments and in the Southern US, poverty is concentrated in rural areas (USDA, 2014). Some effects of poverty include: substandard conditions in housing, nutrition, childcare, access to health care, safety, and access to quality education. Poorer children and teens are also at greater risk for many negative outcomes such as: poor academic achievement, school dropout, abuse and neglect, behavioral and socio-emotional problems, physical health problems, and developmental delays (American Psychological Association, 2014).

University-Community Partnerships

One potential source of aid for communities struggling with these issues is found in the resources located within the universities close to these communities. University and community partnerships have a rich history of success in addressing systemic challenges. The Netter Center at University of Pennsylvania started their partnership with their bordering neighborhoods in 1992 (Netter Center for Community Partnerships, NCCP, 2012a). Since that time, they currently run over 15 initiatives in a broad range of areas (nutrition, career, arts, teaching, etc.) and have been awarded many awards for their service (NCCP, 2012b). Dr. Harkavy, the founding director of the Netter Center, stated the sustainability of these programs lies in the infrastructure of the university as more than 50 classes provide service learning opportunities for college students and
the availability of these experiences attract more applications for the university (personal communication, May 8, 2014). Other universities also have large community outreach programming. Some examples include: Michigan State University (The Center for Community and Economic Development) The University of Minnesota's Center for Democracy and Citizenship's “Community Information Corps”; Portland State University; and University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (Community Wealth, 2015). The development of our Building Resilient Communities (BRC) team was greatly influenced by the work of these pioneers.

Our work at Oklahoma State University is tied to the central mission of a Land Grant University. As a Land Grant institution, we are charged with improving the lives of the citizens of our state through our research, teaching and service. This charge includes addressing the educational, social and economic difficulties facing children, adolescents and their families. Given this mission, the context of the formation of our team was facilitated by this shared value. Our team is led by counseling psychologists but also includes many disciplines including: educational administration, educational technology, sociology, health promotion, agriculture, engineering, social work, and human sciences.

Our team partners with an economically disadvantaged school district nearby. This district serves three small communities where the only business is a gas station on the highway. Since many people in these communities have connections to the school through employment, their children, or sporting events, it was clear the schools were a great outlet to not only give resources to the children attending the school, but all community members. This community is unique in that it contains a highly agriculturally focused area as well a historically black college. This juxtaposition has caused an undercurrent of issues in these communities for decades as well as presents additional contextual variables that needed to be considered for our project. We are
eager to start addressing the dire needs poverty creates in this community. However, we
understand in order to attend to these needs, a culture of safety and trust must first be established.

Early Development

An understanding of the principles of community based participatory research is
imperative for all team members. Some of these principles include the recognition of the
community as an unit of identity; building on existing community strengths and resources; and
addressing health from multiple angles (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Part of the role
of the counseling psychology leadership involves helping team members in less socially focused
fields, like engineering or business for example, to understand the core principles of this model.
Another important skill psychologists can contribute in teams like this is team building. In order
to promote a sense of belonging and productivity between team members, we use tools of open
communication, even distribution of power, and flexible/informal meetings.

There are a few things to keep in mind when beginning university-community
partnerships with local schools. These relationships may take a long time to grow and should not
be rushed in order to establish a genuine working relationship. Community and school leaders
must be fully informed and supportive of the activities of the partnership. It is critically
important to make sure that the relationship is solid before moving forward with programming.
Many disadvantaged schools may have had bad experiences with previous partners that did not
take the time to develop a strong relationship or had poor follow through. It will be necessary to
start with small successes or actions to show commitment to the community. This may include
simply attending community events and providing meaningful service in the community.

Developing Initiatives
Our program used participatory action strategies to encourage community engagement to conduct a multi-phase needs assessment within our partner community. This model is based off the work of several university-community partnerships and their successes (Cantor & Englot, 2013; Harkavy, Hartley, Hodges & Weeks, 2013). For this qualitative research project, semi-structured one-on-one in person interviews, semi-structured focus groups, and town hall style meetings were conducted. Semi-structured interviews are a standard technique in qualitative research, which provides a basic interview outline, but allows the respondent to elaborate as he or she sees fit. Following established protocol in social science research, the research team used key informants followed by snowball sampling techniques for data collection (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; McIntyre, 2005; Rubin & Babbie, 2007).

Our needs assessment showed that both teachers and parents are greatly invested in the health and well-being of their students. This investment can be used to foster engagement in a variety of interventions. Psychologists are uniquely positioned to lead many relevant initiatives because of their knowledge of the impact of cultural factors and access to research. When entering a community system and attending community events, avoiding being labeled with any new or existing negative stereotypes is important. This lack of labeling will enable more comfortable interactions with many groups and in turn create opportunities for these groups to come together. The following is a list of interventions our BRC team have developed and have used to improve the overall culture and sense of safety at the school and within in the community:

- Provided Teacher Professional Development
  - Empathy / healthy conflict resolution
  - Communicating more frequent positive messages
• Increased parent/teacher communication through technology (e.g. Remind, Buzzmob)
• Recruited a more diverse parent group and empowered them to create events
• Held more casual events to expose parents to the school in a positive way
• Hosted cultural events (e.g. Black History Month Art Show)
• Created practicum site for counseling intern to increase services
• Assisted the school in writing grants for school initiatives

Potential Outcomes

These initiatives will likely change the school culture, which in turn will shift the community culture. One major predicted benefit is higher parental involvement. Parental involvement is key because it creates a significant positive effect on the adjustment and achievement of children even after controlling for all other factors (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). The effect of parental involvement styles is much larger than the impact of different levels of quality in the school for elementary aged students (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Parental involvement has a significant negative correlation with child depression (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014); is related to children’s overall psychological well-being, adjustment, and peer relationships (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009); and impacts their academic achievement (Chavkin, 2006; Comer, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Pruitt, 2012).

Programming in these initiative areas may also reduce burnout of the small dedicated group of teachers and parents who hold the majority of leadership positions. School environments with low financial and volunteer resources are at risk for teachers not having time or resources to connect with parents (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007); teachers/administrators having a “don’t care” attitude (Angion, 2009); schools being unable to
widely advertise events (Angion, 2009; Green et al., 2007); schools being unresponsive to parent’s life stressors (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The professional development activities described above were thoughtfully created with these risk factors in mind and as an attempt to mitigate these stressors.

The initiatives may also reduce racially based tensions in the community. We have purposely developed our interventions and interactions to allow space for community members to address their concerns with each other in an open, respectful manner. We have incorporated materials into our training materials that specifically address areas of racial tension from both general, universal concerns, as well as local, specific examples of recent and past conflict. We are hopeful that establishing strong lines of communication within the community about historical and current issues within the community will allow for a space for productive problem solving in the future.

Conclusions

University-Community partnerships are an underutilized method of providing multifaceted interventions to communities in need. These partnerships are guided by community based participatory research methods and may involve roles and activities with which psychologists are not familiar. Luckily, pioneers of these partnerships have created extensive guides. We have included some helpful links below. Collaborations and support often come easily as the positive effects of the partnerships are clear. We hope we can encourage others to do similar work in their communities.

Helpful resources for people doing similar work

- Community Toolbox - http://ctb.ku.edu/
- Community Wealth - http://community-wealth.org/
About the Authors

Fae Frederick, MA sends a lot of emails, uses a lot of post-its and generally tries to keep everything running smoothly for the Building Resilient Communities Team. In her spare time she is a doctoral student in the counseling psychology program at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include whatever the community names as their biggest need. In the past that has included parental involvement and strengths based batterers intervention programs. She received her Masters degree in Mental Health Counseling from Boston College and her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Auburn University at Montgomery.

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