



Learning from and collaborating with marginalized communities

Rachael D. Goodman is an associate professor in the counseling and development program at George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia. She is also president of Counselors for Social Justice.

Danielle Irving-

Johnson: Tell us about yourself and your current role in the counseling profession.

Rachael Goodman:

At GMU, I'm lucky to teach in a program that is aligned with my values and where all counseling course work is taught with a social justice and multicultural perspective in mind. I teach courses on research, career counseling and trauma counseling.

Broadly, my work focuses on social justice issues in counseling, including how systemic injustices impact individuals and how we can best work at multiple levels to prevent and ameliorate these concerns.

In particular, I study trauma from a social justice perspective, which means I use a broader, more inclusive lens through which to view trauma, including systemic oppression or racism-based trauma and intergenerational trauma. Given my focus on social justice and trauma, I'm interested in working collaboratively with marginalized communities to address, redress and prevent the challenges they face, as well as build resilience and persistence in the face of structural barriers.

I'm also the 2017-2018 president of Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ), a division of the American Counseling Association. CSJ promotes social justice

in our profession and supports our members in the work they are doing in their own communities to further social justice.

DIJ: What specific areas of interest do you have with regard to research?

RG: Over the past several years, my colleagues and I have been using a model of action research called community-based participatory research (CBPR). Essentially, in our CBPR work, we build partnerships with communities we wish to serve and collaboratively develop an agenda to undertake research and action that is meaningful to that community.

Currently we work with immigrants, many of whom are undocumented and from Central America. Together with our community partners and community advisory board, Amigas de la Comunidad, we explore the sources of trauma and stress experienced by this community, as well as the ways in which community members persist despite difficult conditions. We believe it is important that counselors don't simply think of mental health as an individual or familial concern. Instead, we need to think systemically and understand the structural barriers that create or exacerbate sources of stress and trauma within communities. Using this lens, we can work with individuals, families and communities while also working to create policies, procedures and structures that promote well-being.

DIJ: Can you elaborate on the key components of the CBPR model and its foundation?

RG: CBPR is an approach to research that differs from traditional research in

several important and interrelated ways. First, we seek to address a community-identified problem — instead of a researcher-identified problem — in partnership with community members themselves. Second, while traditional research focuses on generating new knowledge, CBPR focuses on the generation of new knowledge and application of that knowledge to make positive change. Thus, CBPR holds the dual emphasis of research and action.

CBPR projects are generally more localized and specific than some traditional research projects. [CBPR projects seek] to make an impact in a particular community, neighborhood or area. CBPR emphasizes power and resource sharing, so the decisions about what and how to engage in research and action are made with the community members, not by researchers who tell community members what research is going to be conducted.

Finally, in this model we are interested in sustainability and capacity building. We seek to make policy changes that can have longer-term impacts, develop interventions that can be maintained over the long term, and provide funding and training to community members to lead and sustain their own initiatives.

DIJ: What concerns and main issues are prevalent with the population with which you are currently working?

RG: Currently we work with immigrants, many of whom are undocumented and from Central America. Before discussing the challenges, I want to note that the people with whom we work are themselves a very diverse group with varied backgrounds, life experiences and diversity in terms of ethnicity, country of origin, language, work experience, family



Rachael D. Goodman

structure and education. I also want to note that there is clearly great strength and resilience among this community, as individuals and families persist despite numerous barriers, constraints and traumas — including in the U.S. and in their country of origin and during their migration journey.

The concerns expressed within this community are largely systemic concerns. These concerns have been ongoing but have been exacerbated by the recent presidential election and the increase in anti-immigrant speech and actions, as well as the raids by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents. Many concerns that families express are related to their personal lack of legal immigration status in the U.S. or the lack of status of someone in their family. Some families fear deportation or fear being separated from their family if a member of their family is deported. Many families are mixed-status families, so some members may be documented or U.S. citizens, while others do not have legal immigration status.

There is virtually no pathway for most of the people with whom we work to obtain legal status, so the choice is to remain in the U.S. without papers and living in fear, or to return to their home country where there is often extreme danger or a lack of safety and opportunities. Families that we work with also face difficult conditions in the U.S. as they try to sustain themselves and their families. Many work in low-wage and unstable jobs, if they're able to obtain work at all. Where we are working in the [Washington] D.C. metro area, families often share small apartments with strangers in order to deal with the high cost of living and limited income. Housing conditions are often poor, and family life is stressful in these tight, shared living spaces.

And yet it's important to note that these families are finding creative ways to sustain themselves and build what they hope will be opportunities and better lives for their children. They are navigating these challenging and stressful situations while also often having significant trauma histories as well as challenges adjusting to new societal structures, a new language and new cultures.

DIJ: What challenges or obstacles have you had to overcome in your role?

RG: One challenge related to my role is that the structure of the university and the requirements of my job are not aligned with the CBPR model. CBPR and other types of action research are very time intensive, and they include responsibilities that are not given “credit” at most academic institutions. I'll share an example that illustrates the challenge commonly faced by those of us who do more engaged scholarship or community service work that we find very meaningful but also challenging given other time and role expectations.

Our team recently hosted two Immigrant Family Preparedness clinics where we collaborated with lawyers, notaries and interpreters to help families who are worried about detention or deportation fill out power of attorney forms and other family preparedness documents. This idea originated from what the families we are working with say they need. Fear of detention or deportation is creating intense fear in this community. In addition to lobbying for a long-term fix such as a pathway to citizenship, as counselors and community partners, it is critical that we try to help alleviate fear and aid families in having the power to take up any resources or legal protections available to them.

Such endeavors make CBPR and other types of action research and service more time-consuming than traditional research. They also are central to what makes this work incredibly rewarding and meaningful because they meet the community's expressed needs. My hope in sharing this is that universities will work to support faculty who are doing engaged scholarship.

Of course, the risk I assume with this type of work pales in comparison to the risk that the families we work with are facing related to lack of legal immigration status, family separation, violence in their home country and other concerns. I hope that we, as faculty, will do more of the work that directly, actively and collaboratively addresses the hardships faced by undocumented immigrants and other marginalized communities, and that we will have the institutional support to do so.

DIJ: What advice would you like to give to counselors working with the immigrant population?

RG: Before working with any community of which you are not a member, it is critical that counselors work to understand that community. First, do your homework. Try to alleviate some of the responsibility you might inadvertently place on the community to educate you. That being said, hold the knowledge that you bring into the situation lightly and remain curious. Perhaps what you've read or learned is not accurate, biased or just not relevant to the specific local community in which you are working. Remember to listen and not to assume.

When working with immigrants specifically, learn about the immigration process. I remember when I first began working with refugees, I knew very little about the refugee resettlement process. One small yet important detail I learned was that refugees to the U.S. have to pay back the cost of their airfare to the U.S., so they often arrive already in debt.

For whatever group of people you're working with, it's imperative that you spend time learning about the policies and procedures that impact people. You should learn about them not only from the policymakers, but also from service providers and, of course, the community members themselves. The intention of a policy is often very different from the actual impact that it ends up having.

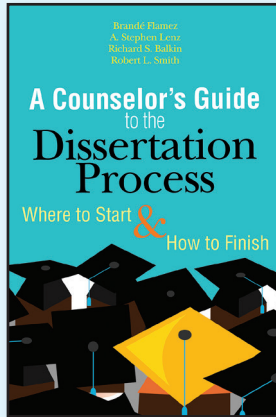
DIJ: What would you like to see implemented throughout the counseling profession to benefit the immigrant population?

RG: I would like to see more counselors from immigrant backgrounds who can work with their own communities and provide more insight into the counseling profession. That means we need to examine the structural barriers within our own profession to see what practices and policies may keep potential future counselors from entering and successfully completing counseling programs.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, immigrants and their U.S.-born children make up 27 percent of the U.S. population. Clearly, we need all counselors to be prepared to work with immigrants and children or family members of immigrants. To that end, all counseling course work should be taught

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with social justice and multiculturalism in mind, and counseling curriculum should include specific content on the experiences of immigrants.

I would also like to see all counselors engage with immigrant communities or advocacy organizations in their local areas. There are many immigrant-led organizations that we can support and learn from so that we can be better counselors. There should be more research, including action research, that helps us understand the unique experiences, challenges and strengths of immigrant communities. We need to learn from these communities what techniques in counseling and healing are appropriate and meaningful. As with other communities that are marginalized, we can inadvertently exacerbate distress or even cause harm if we fail to understand immigrant communities.

DIJ: What else would you like for ACA members to know about you or your work?

RG: We can all do our part, and we are not alone. I'm very grateful to the colleagues, students, mentors, friends, family members and community members who have supported me and continue to make this work possible. I have learned numerous lessons, but the one that stands out at the moment is something my spouse likes to say: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

There are myriad social injustices in our country and our world, and the work of trying to ameliorate these injustices and create a world in which our clients and communities can attain well-being is sometimes daunting. If we each try to do our part, we can make collective impact that will chip away at these injustices. ❖

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