How We Can Promote "Citizenship" in Communities

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Figure 1. Full citizenship requires a sense of belonging. Photograph by Jonathan Stefanko. Public Domain

What is Citizenship?

The word "citizenship" has a common understanding, political charge, and legal ramifications. Simply defined by Merriam Webster, citizenship is "membership in a community."[1] In this case, citizenship is and should be prominent within the field of Community Psychology. However, the term is often associated with legal connotations defined by geographical borders. In the United States and elsewhere, citizenship implies certain rights and responsibilities to the State. Politically, the term has been used to differentiate in-groups and out-groups, often with racially charged messages.

Highlights

The word "citizenship" has broad meaning: connecting the individual to a community by a sense of belonging.

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Understanding and facilitating the connection between people and the 5Rs (rights, responsibilities, roles, resources, and relationships) is crucial.

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Changing our language to emphasize humanity and ability can help.

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[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/citizenship

If we return to the definition of citizenship as a sense of belonging to a group, we gain an understanding of "community" as more broad than simple geographical proximity, membership, or identification with a group. In "Citizenship and Community Mental Health Care," Allison N. Ponce and Michael Rowe define citizenship as "the person's strong connection to the 5Rs of rights, responsibilities, roles, resources, and relationships that society offers to its members through public and social institutions."[2] Ponce and Rowe go on to explain that citizenship is a sense of belonging and that this sense is understood and reinforced by others.

What then, does citizenship mean for people who either identify as—or who others identify as—in the out-group but living amongst the in-group? This question can refer to many marginalized groups such as the homeless, undocumented immigrants, and the mentally ill.

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> through public and social institutions."[1]

A Citizenship Framework draws attention to the extent to which individuals can participate within their communities and have access to community resources. A Citizenship Framework also posits that citizens should have rights/responsibilties to the State, which are carefully considered. Interestingly, this framework was developed from mental outreach to the homeless. While medical, mental health, and tangible housing support could be provided to individuals, these all failed to provide affective needs of a positive identity and sense of belonging.

In short, the neediness and reliance on the provision of resources equated to a lesser feeling of citizenship. Ponce and Rowe argue that society has a responsibility to provide the following to achieve full citizenship:

- Support for the 5Rs (Rights, Responsibilities, Roles, Resources, and Relationships);
- An environment to build a sense of belonging through provision of structural, economic, and enviromental support; and
- Legal, social, and political rights.

Ponce and Rowe discuss a recovery mindset wherein we have a social responsibility to validate someone's person-enviroment fit. In the case of the mentally ill, we can note the "individual's hopes and strivings in the social context." We do not need to wait for citizenship until someone is "recovered." If we view mental health, for example, as a continuum and a process, we can work with community members to assert their citizenship according to their abilities. A recovery mindset can be applied to other social issues as well.

[2] Ponce, A. N., Rowe, M. (2018). Citizenship and Community Mental Health Care. American Journal of Community Psychology: 61(1-2), 22-31. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12218

How, then, can we apply this to our own work in marginalized communities? A first step toward emphasizing citizenship could be as simple as making a change in our English language patters. Rather than a "homeless person," or "a mentally-ill man," defining the person first can reflect the Citizenship Framework and remind us of our responsibilities. A "man who has been homeless since 2006" should be conferred legal and poltical rights. He is, after all, a man first. Changing the ways in which we identify marginalized people (e.g. emphasizing personhood before the concieved problem) reflects human dignity. While simply changing our language will not achieve belonging, it will go a long way in resetting our minds to the humanity of the issue.

What Does This Mean For?

Research—We need to carefully think through the assumptions of ability and incapacity and build an understanding of citizenship into our work. Community Psychology as a field is particularly well suited to do so. Empowerment, reflection, and participatory research methods are not unique to our field, yet characterize it. Assuming a Citizenship Framework blends with our goal to support healthy and strong communities.

Practice—Working within communities means considering citizenship beyond a legal perspective. Our work can focus on rights, responsibilities, roles, resources, and relationships (the 5Rs) of community members to support feelings of belonging. Changing language to emphasize the person with the illness, malady, marginalization, etc. is one step toward reframing people in context.