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The Creation of Settings as Social Change: the Role of Social Movements

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Abstract

'The creation of settings' is a key theme of community psychology. Some of these developments break new ground, pioneering social relationships in advance of those otherwise sanctioned by the existing social order. As such they are 'prefigurative'. However, there is always the threat of their settling, or being forced into forms and ways that increasingly conform to the rules and norms of the dominant society. The interplay between prefigurative and reactionary tendencies tells us about the nature of a society and what will have to be done and what overcome to create social justice. For an innovation to successfully move beyond prefiguration will require a coalition of support extending beyond its immediate context. Ideas from the study of social movements are used to explore the connections between the creation of settings, social change, communities of interest, and ideology. In so doing it argues for an opening of community and applied social psychology theory and action to the societal level, so the 'social' can reflect more than the interpersonal or intergroup level of analysis.

Community and applied social psychology take place within a societal and socio-political context. Despite this, most of the concepts available to the field reflect a social psychology where the social rarely embraces concepts from social theory, so that effectively social psychology means the psychology of interpersonal, intra-group, and inter-group relationships (there are however some exceptions, e.g. Leonard, 1984; Martín-Baró, 1983, 1989; Himmelweit and Gaskell, 1992). This paper offers an analysis of the creation of social settings to explore the possible contribution of social movement theory to the theory and practice of community psychology.

One characteristic common to much community psychology is the proactive creation of new social settings. This paper attempts to draw together some concepts of broad generality from outside the community psychology field, to try and illuminate some of the dynamic aspects of setting creation in a societal context.

Sarason (1974: 269) defines social settings broadly:

By a new setting I mean any instance in which two or more people come together in new and sustained relationships to attain stated objectives.

This could be anything from cohabitation to social revolution: this broad definition of new social settings will also be followed here, although much community psychology has focused on human service settings (see however Thomas and Veno, 1996; Montero, 1994, for broader views.)

Sarason (1974: 270-271) identified four reasons why new settings can fail. His analysis was based on an analysis of mostly government funded human service alternatives in the USA in the 1960s.

1. Little or no prior anticipation that verbal agreement on values and goals will be confronted with disagreement about the appropriateness of actions, and the absence of vehicles for handling disagreement. Often a suppression of conflict as inimical to unity - suppression which only serves to reduce cohesiveness.
2. The primary basis of the setting, or its aims, overshadow other aspects of setting maintenance.
3. Creators of the setting regard it as 'their own' which creates barriers with other communities, whose collaboration is important for the success of the setting.
4. The persistence of traditional concepts that enter into the functioning of what was to be a new set of social relations.

What follows is concerned chiefly with aspects relevant to the last two factors.

The radical nature of alternative social settings

Alternative social settings will often pioneer alternative social relations, while still being located within a dominant social context which puts pressure (passive and active, implicit and explicit) on the alternative setting. Some examples are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Alternative social settings in relation to the dominant order.

New social setting	New social relations	Dominant social context
1. LETS (local exchange trading systems).	Alternative labour exchange relationships.	· Orthodox exchange / exploitation relations. · Non-local markets.
2. Supported living for impaired persons	Support as a right to enable inclusion in communities.	· Societal exclusion and devaluation of impaired persons.
3. Co-operative alternatives	Social ownership of means of distribution and production.	· Market where big capital dominates and drives down costs.
4. National Health Service	Health care taken out of the commodity market.	· Capitalist economic system prone to fiscal crises. · Entrenched professional interest groups. · Increased hegemony of market model.
5. Social revolutions in post colonial countries	Social ownership. Empowerment of peasants and workers (politically, and through redistribution).	· Global system of postcolonial exploitation. · Local elites with stake in exploitative relations. · Imperialist policing / superpower conflicts.

We can call alternative social settings that challenge the dominant social order, 'prefigurative'. The term is associated with Gramsci, who pointed to the importance in struggle of exploring, defining, and anticipating the new social forms to which the struggle itself aspires (Gramsci, 1968, 31 {also 1977: 95}; 1968, 32-33, 38. See also Williams, 1979 :420-425). The concept has something in common with Freire's concept of 'untested feasibility' (Freire, 1999: 205-207).

In any new social setting, it could be argued that there will be two opposing processes. The prefigurative, creative, explorative, radical processes and achievements will be pitted against 'recuperative', retrogressive, traditionalist, unimaginative, conservative tendencies. The sources for the reactionary tendencies are likely to be multiple - in the external environment, and its impact on the setting itself, but also in the ideological and psychological baggage that the participants inevitably bring with them. There is never a clean break with the past.

Social movements

It is simplistic to talk of new social settings in isolation from the people that create them, live part or all of their lives in them, and defend them. It may be useful to consider this human dimension in terms of social movements. Most social settings will be connected in some way to some kind of social movement. This term will be used here almost as broadly as the term 'social setting' has been. Examples include community groups, tenants associations, political organisations, trades unions, special interest groups and campaigning organisations, and coalitions of these.

Now, the extent to which the new social setting can stay prefigurative, and even survive, will depend on its connection to its social movement, and on the nature of that social movement.

Being so varied, social movements will have different concerns, values, ideologies, aims, and so on. Ray (1993), (in an analysis of social movements in 'peripheral' states) distinguishes between two tendencies, traditionalising and de-traditionalising (see Table 2).

Table 2: Traditionalising versus de-traditionalising social movements.

Traditionalising: chiefly defensive	De-traditionalising: chiefly offensive
Mass religions	Ecology
Ethnicism	Human rights
Nationalism	Self-help
Authoritarian populism	Broad coalitions

Similar comparisons could be made between parent-based organisations defensive of institutional models of care on the one hand, and those actively involved in promoting educational and social inclusion on the other. Community groups that are concerned with protecting their locality from settlement by 'undesirable' outsiders can similarly be contrasted with those that are developing inclusive responses to the social problems they experience.

Often, new settings make manifest some aspects of the galvanising ideology of the social movement. They therefore feed back into the social movement as persuasive exemplars (images of possibility) and sites to defend (causes célèbres). If the social movement has an overarching, transcending philosophy, it is likely to be able to support the setting to grow and develop, but where the social movement has

only a limited philosophy, then it is more likely that the setting will become 'stuck' and increasingly take on features of the dominant system.

So, when Community Psychologists are involved in creating new settings we can and must pay attention to the social movement dimension, both to create the conditions under which the setting can survive policy changes in the state and its service system, and to inform the struggle for principled social change and social justice (Martín-Baró, 1986; Prilleltensky and Nelson, 1997) on a wider scale.

There is a literature on social movements, which holds some useful ideas for those working with groups and movements to create, develop and sustain new social settings. Four strands can be identified although new forms of social movements emerging in the 1990s pose fresh challenges both to social movement theory and to social psychology (Vázquez, 2000):

1. A largely European literature, rooted in social theory and sociology, on New Social Movements (e.g. feminism, ecology, lifestyle movements) is concerned with the question: 'why do social movements arise'. Habermas (1973, 1981) emphasised crises in the legitimation of authority, and the colonisation of the (implicit, social, phenomenological) lifeworlds of citizens by formalised systems (market and state) for ordering social relations (see Burton, 1994). Offe (1985), relates new social movements to the 'crisis of governability' stemming from the contradiction between capitalism and mass democracy. Touraine (1988) sees the new social movements emerging around the transition from industrial to post-industrial society. These European theorists emphasise issues of identity in social movements.
2. A North American social-psychological literature, 'Resource Mobilisation Theory' (e.g. Zald and McCarthy, 1979) is concerned with how social movements operate, and how they mobilise support.
3. More recently, attempts have been made to unite these two approaches, which in any case are probably mainly complementary rather than contradictory (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Foweraker, 1995; Gamson, 1992; Mueller, 1992; Ray, 1993).
4. While not usually considered within the field of social movements, the insights of Gramsci (1968: 31, 32-33, 38 {also 1977: 95}). See also Gramsci, 1971, Williams, 1979: 420-425; Burton, 1989; Burton and Kagan, 1996; Kagan and Burton, 1995) are invaluable to an understanding of the relationships between ideology and the lived world in which dominant and emancipatory social

movements operate. Gramsci uses the concept of ideological hegemony to explain how order is maintained in modern capitalist societies by the organisation of consent. His understanding of hegemony is not just about beliefs and ideas, but concerns the whole of society: the hegemonic ideology permeates society, even defining the nature and limit of common sense. Ideology, which is more than ideas, acts as a kind of 'social cement', unifying a bloc of varied social groups and interests. In this, a hegemonic social group exercises leadership and power, not through crude ideological domination, but rather through the combination of key elements from the ideologies of those social groups that form an alliance or social bloc with it. Elsewhere we have identified the following postulates about the exercise of ideological hegemony in relation to social settings (Burton, 1994; Kagan and Burton, 1996):-

- i.) **Ideological hegemony, with its ideological coalitions, has boundaries other than those of the setting.** Therefore change efforts at the ideological level must focus on both the internal coalitions of the setting but also on other external interest groups who can be empowered in the process of cohering in a hegemonic coalition.
- ii.) **Ideological coalitions are likely to have varying degrees of hegemony.** The effective range of their hegemony over diverse interest groups will vary as will the intensity with which such groups identify with the hegemonic ideology.
- iii.) **In order to continue uniting diverse interests under changing conditions, the dominant group will need what we call *necessary hegemony* , i.e. a sufficient degree of hegemony (in range and intensity) to handle threats to the hegemonic view.** Where there is a deficit in the necessary hegemony of the dominant group in the coalition then there can be signs of hegemonic strain with the breakdown of ideology and the splitting off of components of the coalition.
- iv.) We therefore have a basis for the succession of hegemonic groups and their wider coalitions. **The more successful hegemonists will be able to alter both the ideology and the assemblage of allied groupings to adapt to changing conditions, protecting a core ideology and the core membership of the alliance.** It is this *active* engagement that Gramsci refers to with the metaphors of the 'Modern Prince' and the 'War of Position'.

The store of social learning

Finally, how can these ideas of new social settings linked to social movements help identify priorities for the expenditure of energy by community psychologists and other change agents?

Given the constant tension between prefigurative and reactionary tendencies in new social settings, it is not surprising that such settings are often threatened, either in terms of their existence or their ethos. It is tempting to want to defend such innovatory social settings, and often this is a precondition for the maintenance of change. Sometimes, however, it may be not be a particularly high priority to defend a new setting. Two such cases can be identified.

1. Sometimes the setting really was prefigurative, and although it is now under threat, its insights and innovations are carried on into more mainstream social relations. Short term grant aided projects sometimes have such widespread success, although they themselves are not sustained. (For an example, see Kagan and Burton, 2000: 78-81).
2. Sometimes energy would be better expended elsewhere because the prefigurative battle has already been lost in the particular setting.

In the latter case, however, the setting and its associated movement have not necessarily failed. New social settings engender new learning about social relations, which is not just retained in that setting, but released into the wider society (Ray, 1993) in a variety of ways including through the lived experience of those who participated, were challenged, who grew, or benefited. Sometimes that social learning is successfully stabilised in new social institutions (services, customs, laws, rights, democratic processes), and sometimes not. Yet that learning is always stored among people, and can and will be accessed later, at times and in ways that cannot be predicted. So even apparently failed social settings can, despite the degeneration of democracy, contribute to a more informed and reflexive civil society. An example of this is the resurgence of ideas about community development, popular in the 1970s (e.g. CDP, 1977; Jones, 1983) that are reappearing in current discourses about community, active citizenship, and so on, after their almost complete silence during the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Dalziel, 1999, Hoggett, 1997).

Conclusion

We have attempted to show how concepts from social movement theory can illuminate the

relationships between social settings and the wider social forces and relations that can facilitate or impede them. In doing this we are implicitly arguing that an effective community and applied social psychology requires an understanding of social theory beyond the psychological if it is not to restrict its vision to the interpersonal or micro level of theory and application.

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