

# **Living Poverty in the UK: Community psychology as accompaniment**

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# **Living Poverty in the UK: Surviving on the edge**

## **Abstract**

The experiences of people living poverty do not feature highly in the academic or professional psychology literature. This paper draws on the stories of two women who have lived poverty all their lives, and will discuss the ways people find of being resourceful whilst struggling with living poverty. These will include practical, friendship and networking ways. The accounts will include issues concerned with some of the perverse effects of professional practices, and social policies. Some of the very institutions and practices that are meant to support people living poverty, paradoxically, further oppress them. As an alternative to change and intervention strategies, it will be suggested that community psychological practice might learn from other radical movements for social change and liberation (in particular the human rights and social development movements) to develop a practice of 'accompaniment'. Some of the key features of such community psychological praxis will be outlined.

**Key Words: Women, poverty, stories, accompaniment**

## Introduction

Deepa et al.(2000a) report what poor people from across the world who are living poverty say. Their accounts include:

*Poverty is like living in jail, living under bondage, waiting to be free.*

*(Jamaica)*

*Poverty is lack of freedom, enslaved by crushing daily burden, by*

*depression and fear of what the future will bring (Georgia)*

*When one is poor, she has to say in public, she feels inferior. She has*

*no food, so there is famine in her house; no clothing, and no progress*

*in her family (Uganda)*

*For a poor person everything is terrible - illness, humiliation, shame.*

*We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone.*

*No-one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of (Moldova)*

The accounts from people in the UK are not so very different. In preparation for this paper, the authors discussed living poverty in the UK. Poor women's experiences included: 'The shame and humiliation of standing in line, where everyone on the bus just stares at you, first thing on a Monday morning...the dependency on the whims of the workers ...the depression and the drudgery ...the confinement in the house... there is no time or energy to even think of what the future might bring' (Field notes, June 2003).

The British Government claims to be committed to poverty reduction and has a number of policy frameworks and strategy statements, emanating initially from the Social Exclusion Unit, but more recently from the Department of Work and Pensions (see for example, DWP, 2002). Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the UK Government, launching the strategy

*'Tackling Child Poverty: Giving Every Child The Best Possible Start in Life'*,  
put it most graphically when he said:

*(Child) poverty is a scar on Britain's soul and an affront to our sense of  
decency as a nation (Brown, 2001)*

Poverty is, clearly a political issue. It is also critical to a concern with social issues and social justice - key interests of community psychology. However, Lott and Bullock (2001) suggest it is invisible in psychology, reflecting the discipline's middle class standpoint. They argue, along with Barker (1996) that the dominant trend in psychology has been to "*ignore or pathologize the poor, or to examine their experience only in comparison to a middle class norm*" (p. 190).

In many ways, we know more than ever before details of the extent of wealth related and multiple deprivation related poverty. The United Nations, in particular UNICEF, and WHO, as well as, for example the World Bank, all supply global information telling us that 2.8 billion people in the world live on less than \$700 a year and of these 1.2 billion earn less than \$1 a day. In the UK the Government publishes exhaustive, geographically based, deprivation indices, and statistics linked to work, income, health, 'quality of life' and quality of the environment (most of these are available from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, but some are from the Treasury or Department of Work and Pensions - see for example, UK Government, 2003).

We know, for instance how hard it is to live on a pension of £79 a week and that some ethnic elders are not entitled to claim income related benefits at all, pushing them into even greater poverty (Lloyd, McLennan, Noble, Sigala and Wright, 2003). We know that, in contrast to 30 years ago, it is now not possible to live in either the UK or USA on one low paid job (Abrams, 2002; Ehrenreich, 1999, 2002; Toynbee, 2003) and that if people are able to work they will often have to take more than one, often undeclared job.

Investigations into recent civil disturbances indicate that although there has been an apparent change (improvement) in society as a whole, the last 50 years have demonstrated a mounting failure of the state to make any real difference to people on the margins of society (see for example Cattle, 2001; Pike, 2002 for some ideas about what might change at a societal level to make a difference).

And yet, what does psychology know about poverty? Professional psychologists may meet poor people in their practice, and may wonder at their levels of non attendance at appointments, non-compliance, inability to implement treatment or behavioural recommendations and so on. But short of the pathologizing models they may be able to use, they will have little to draw on from their education and training in psychology that will help them understand people's strengths and capacities, as well as their priorities, hopes and dreams. Their own middle class aspirations will be no guide, and there is a danger that the 'if that's how people want to live, it's their choice' discourse, so prevalent in British welfare professions, will guide their interventions. We will be suggesting that psychology, and psychologists, must listen - and hear - what poor people themselves are saying about their

lives, and then try to make sense of the implications of this for psychological work and interventions (or not).

In the introductory paper to an issue of the Journal of Social Issues, devoted to women's experiences of poverty in the USA, Lott and Bullock (2001: 190) urge

*"we need to listen to what poor people say about their circumstances, experiences, strengths, skills, values, barriers. Poor people's voices have for too long been 'muted and isolated, having less access to public space than the discourses on the poor generated by the nonpoor' (Rimstead, 1997:258)".*

The exhortation to listen to the what poor people have to say about their lives, and to build lessons learnt from this into policy development is echoed from a number of different points. The international NGO, ATD Fourth World, has been pushing for poor people to be listened to, and responded to, since 1957. More recently in the UK, there was a Poverty Commission which reported in 2000. Half the commissioners were poor people and the work was undertaken by talking with local groups of poor people. A report of a local consultation group in Wales, urged

*"we are not inferior, - we are not deficient - but we are made to feel that way. You have the power to change things - listen to our voice!"* (UK Coalition Against Poverty, 2000).

The World Bank, too, has moved towards a position of arguing that listening to poor people must be a central plank in poverty eradication programmes. Utilising processes of participatory poverty appraisals (Norton, 2001), the World Bank reported on the voices of 40,000 poor women and men in 50 countries (Deepa, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, Koch-Schulte, S., 2000; Deepa, Chambers, Shah, and Petesch, 2000; Deepa and Petesch, 2002). This project highlights the necessity for a caution in using the voices of the poor to underpin and legitimise policy developments, insofar as it can be argued that the development goals of the World Bank are primarily to support neo-liberalist global economic development strategies (see for example Pilger, 2002; Potter, 2000). The trouble with using the voices of those marginalized by the social system to legitimate these policies is that they are, in and of themselves, the very policies and development strategies that will further marginalize poor people at a global level. (A similar argument has been made in relation to participatory processes more generally, see Cooke and Kothari, 2002).

So, we are not suggesting that we listen to poor people in order to justify what it is we want to do anyway, or to legitimate psychological work with poor people. Rather, we need to listen in order to learn; to challenge ourselves and our practices; and to examine how our work may be contributing to further oppression of people living poverty, rather than contributing towards greater social justice.

It is one thing to exhort ourselves to listen more and to listen more carefully.

But what is it we are listening to?

**Creating and listening to life stories and stories about lives**

Over the last decade and a half community psychological researchers and practitioners have become more sophisticated in their understanding of both relational and interpretative aspects of life story-telling. Narrative enquiry has become both a method for extracting information and as an intervention (psychotherapeutic or social) in itself (see, for example, DeSalvo (1999); Hoshmand, 1993; Thomas and Rappaport, 1996; Rappaport, 2000). Many of the methodological debates in narrative work explore issues of authenticity (Ochs and Capps, 1997), time, self and experience, as well as the ways in which language and discourses are structured (see for example, Freeman, 2002). However, as Dalton et al.; (2001) suggest,

"Depending on the purpose of the research it may not be important that all events in a narrative be verifiable facts ..... Qualitative understanding is concerned with the meaning that participants make of the narrative for their lives .....narratives are one of the best ways to attend to unheard voices....;" (p. 100)

In this sense, we are listening to what the story tellers want us to hear.

### **Method of eliciting stories of living poverty.**

The stories told below were created as a result of purposeful discussion. All three participants (two community activists and one community psychologist) were preparing a workshop for a conference. Their brief was to convey to professional and academic critical and community psychologists what life in poverty was like for those experiencing it day to day, and to explore different ways in which community psychologists might work with those living poverty. The idea was to challenge professional preconceptions about poor people

and their lives. We had all talked about these things on and off before, but not with a clear purpose in mind. I and A had known each other for over 20 years, during which time their lives had converged and diverged at different times. C knew A well and I less so. From the outset enthusiasm was high and there was a strong degree of trust between us all. We spent two whole days talking about life in poverty, recalling incidents, discussing personal and emotional reactions to the material conditions of lives as well as to relationships with other people - families, professionals, the public, politicians and so on. We had been going to tape the conversations, transcribe them and look at the written records for greater insight. However, the recording was unsuccessful. Contemporaneous notes were taken. By the end of the two days we had more or less worked out which aspects of A and I's stories would be related. A decided to concentrate on some recent events which were extremely stressful for her, but which we agreed would be a good exemplar of 'typical experiences'. On the other hand, it was agreed that it would be useful for I to identify some general issues over a longer period of time, to illustrate some applications of community psychological thinking - such as the importance of strong values, and the influence on context on individual action - on her life. A wrote a long version of her own story, and C wrote up a long version of I's story from the notes. C's story was created through discussion of both her involvement with the events being related, prior involvement with campaigns and community activism involving I and A and the potential for hearing what people living poverty themselves say they would like from community psychologists. We then discussed and agreed how the stories would be told. For this written version, we have edited the stories still further, retaining the essential differences in emphasis between them. The editing of the stories

was, again, purposeful. We could be telling stories about vulnerability and frailty; exploitation and oppression; aggression and intimidation; unacceptable professional behaviour; dysfunctional families and preventive services.

Instead we are telling negotiated stories of the mundane, daily grind; of the resilience which is demanded; and of principled engagement with events beyond the control of those living poverty. We are telling stories of allies and of solidarity.

## **Living poverty.**

IE and AS have lived poverty all their lives. We state it thus, as to *live* poverty is to experience poverty - to spend every day with the consequences of both low income and relative deprivation; to live with feelings of having been thwarted in terms of what may have been possible; to live with shame and humiliation and to be beholden on the decisions of others for material well-being. Poverty is not a circumstance just to be endured, it is a state that permeates every feeling, action, relationship and moment of every day. It leads to strong, enduring friendships and relationships of mutual help and support; resilience and the capacity to withstand pressures imposed by others that would severely test anyone's patience and ability to compromise ; strategies, skills and personal qualities that enable possibilities for joy, laughter and even hope to arise and be taken.

## **Angela's Story**

### **Seven months in a life of living poverty**

I wasn't in a great rush to leave the last women's hostel where I'd stayed for 1 month. I didn't feel 'ready' as they say. I felt a lack of confidence in general and finding things like cooking, shopping, phone calls and the practical things associated with caring for myself a strain, to be avoided as I always felt tired and at the time couldn't see a future.

When I went to sign up for the property I joked with the housing officer that I hoped there were no 'neighbours from hell' as I felt very fragile. She said "well actually one tenant downstairs (there are four flats) has a bit of a hygiene problem, and may require some tolerance". I wasn't particularly concerned at this. I said that once I was settled I'd see if there was anything I could do. I moved in a week later, at the end of December.

I busied myself getting the flat together - painting and going around charities, charity shops etc. to get things for the home. I was soon physically and mentally exhausted. I noticed a musky smell in the hallway and inside the flat when I was painting near the door or near radiators or air vents. At this point I believed it was coming in around the front door. I cleaned the hall stairs and landing with every cleaning product to hand. The next day it smelt the same. So I realised it was more of a problem than I thought. Even though I was totally exhausted at this time I started to wake up during the night with the smell. It had got on my bedding. I bought a new quilt and pillows. It made no difference. At this point I still believed it was coming in around the door, so I bought draught proofing and put wide masking tape around it at night and a towel at the bottom. Soon I realised it was coming up around the radiators the sink, the bath and the electric meter. I kept all my clothes, coats, shoes tied in bags.

It was clear from the neighbours that this had been going on for over a year.

### **My complaints-**

I complained in the first week. My complaint was acknowledged.

In the first few months I tried everything to get rid of the smell – like rotten cabbage and dustbins. Mopping, washing on my hands and knees, lots of sprays, disinfectant. air fresheners. At one point the smell was so horrific that in temper I filled buckets with soapy water and bleach and threw it down the stairs and even up against B's door. Shouting and cursing for an hour. I phoned the housing office everyday.

My support worker visited every week. Sometimes I'd be in tears when she arrived, and sometimes phone her on other days when I was fuming or crying. I was under the impression that she complained on my behalf and I only found out after B had gone, that T S W and housing have no contact. So all my distress every week didn't go any further than her. I started to behave in ways quite out of character. I wrote notes to B; at first friendly; I banged on her door shouting; I sprayed fly spray through the letterbox and around the door.

Every week, directly under my living room window at 5 in the morning, she would open up 3/4 black bags and spread the contents over 2 sq metres. She had the sleeves of her fleece jacket pushed up and was sifting through the contents. Everything was filthy in the bags. The smell was worse than anything. Some bags inside other bags were dripping. She seemed to be sorting it into piles. Her arms were black up to the elbow. The stench was unbelievable and unbearable. When the bin men came she gave them one bag and took the others back into her flat.

She started trying to do her sorting after I'd gone to bed. I'd hear the rustling almost the second I put my head on the pillow. If I had windows open, the smell came up there, at the radiators and at the front door, there was no escape from it. None of the workers (council, cleansing, social services, tenancy support) seemed able to do anything except tell *me* I should be careful about fly spraying or shouting out of window/knocking on her door. My behaviour became more extreme. I swore loudly at her and even threw water over her.

She'd carry on as if I didn't exist with water dripping off her head.

We had months of nothing changing. I got the local councillor involved. I heard from my TSW or by listening through the floor that meetings were planned, often postponed, new care packages were to be arranged, but then that there were plans to move B. Nothing changed. The smells continued. I shouted, screamed and threw water.. I felt totally 'contaminated' I'd go down and kick on her door shouting and spraying fly spray inside the letterbox and around the door. I started coughing at night. I still do.

I went on a Radio talk show and told my story. What stuck in my mind most was when he said, "What you're asking me what you should do? You live in the flat above her? Do I really have to tell you?" I took this quite literally. Put all the taps on in the bathroom and went to

bed. I went straight to sleep. I woke up at 1 am to a police radio and council workmen. A few weeks later the smell was back and worse than ever. I went down banging on her windows shouting.

One window was open a fraction and maybe because of the angle of my hand went through it. I remember thinking "I may as well go for it now, and they'll move her out." I ran upstairs, got a hammer and put every window in back and front. I could feel a "whooshing" in my ears for an hour after. I shouted to a neighbour to phone the police. They came. I was arrested. I didn't mind. It might get her out at last. I was cautioned and given a lot of sympathy, as the police and council workers had been overcome by the smell.

I became a regular on the late night and day time talk shows. I felt in a constant rage. I monitored her, took photos, sprayed, shouted, banged on the door, flooded her, broke windows – admitted all to my support worker anyone who'd listen.

It was now June/July 2003. I'd moved in on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2002. Over this period the 5 housing officers I had had, knew very little - none had visited me to hear my side of the story. They would tell me they were coming to see me. On the day they would say, "We'll go and see B first – then – we can't come straight up to your flat because it might bother B. We'll ring you and tell you what happens". They never did. They encouraged me to keep a diary and photos, as if they had no idea of the problem. No one ever asked to see them.

I went to see the councillor again. We (the three other tenants) all signed a letter saying the situation was intolerable and something had to be done. In all this time this was the first complaint to be formally logged. I felt all through that my personal suffering was taken as nothing.

I couldn't enjoy a bath because the smell, or having to have the window and door open, or the fear of the smell coming up just as I lay back to relax made me jump in and out, and I'd have to psych myself up to bother at all by the end. (A bit like when I'm depressed). Sometimes I'd go into the kitchen to work and as I went near the sink a wave of the smell would come up. For a while I thought the water was being contaminated. I started to lose my appetite and stopped cooking. I lost weight.

My relationships suffered. I sometimes squeezed For a few weeks I drank in the morning. Only one or two cans but I'd be drunk and depressed by 9 am. My life was upside down. My body clock was upset and I couldn't cope with my grandchildren. I'd avoid anyone in crisis, including my own children. My close friend had a problem and I dreaded hearing about it. Luckily it was resolved and she became my main support in the final months.

Eventually B was moved out, reluctantly. In a week of the very hot weather the flat was not cleared out for 4 days, during which time I broke some more windows to let some of the smell out and the air in.

By the end of that week a housing officer had contacted me (for only the 3rd time in 7 months)- to issue me with a warning for eviction and to say he would be billing me for the window, but that I could have new carpets. He refused to contribute to my phone bill which had grown because of all the calls I had been making to the agencies over the last few months, even though I had had to take out a loan to pay it. I was made to feel like a naughty school child and was told that my 30 years' record of good tenancy with the Council was irrelevant. By the end of the next week he, too had moved on, and there was no record (other than the one I had kept) of the offer for new carpets. Bailiffs were being sent round as I had not paid my Council Tax (which is included in my rent and already paid) and I was being sent gas bills when I had no independent gas supply. Those are other stories to be told another time.

On an emotional level I can't seem to shift from the strong feeling that I did what I had to do. Today I can't think of anything I personally could have done or should I say been capable of at the time due to circumstance. I am still shocked at discovering what I am capable of doing.

When I went on a bus or in a car or other confined space I wondered if people could smell B's smell on my clothes or in my hair I had a worthless feeling. I noted other blocks didn't have a B in them, just ours. Did I matter less than others? Were we in this block lesser people? I certainly felt it.

When I'd been out a feeling of dread came over me at re-entering the building. Every time, I could feel myself go into 'fight' mode. I gave up on getting a home together. I wasn't sure now I'd be staying.

I struggled with what were my rights and B's rights and felt I had none. I felt like a conjoined twin to B. I didn't want my grandchildren to stay over in case there were dangerous bacteria in the air and I was uncomfortable about them holding the banisters as they came upstairs.

All the authorities knew about the situation but none acknowledged the effect on me.

Now I'm worried what the neighbours think of me. I've only spoken to the people in my block.

Though some were aware of the problem, I felt others may be critical.

The panic feeling and the behaviour I have come to understand this led to, was one of beginning to see B as a verminous dog, which then allowed me to do what I did. I am horrified to hear myself say this as in the past I have supported and defended people who are vulnerable and who have personal problems.

Just watching B 'sorting' the rubbish was traumatic, and I'd be shaking as I spied on her or shouted down. I'd describe watching her as like watching a horror film. Wanting to cover my eyes, run away, be sick but knowing that I had to watch - to try to understand. Unfortunately it made me feel worse, in that I could now visualise what she was doing inside the flat, directly under me, and exactly what the foul smell was coming up, whereas before I had only guessed.

I now only occasionally brace myself before going into the hall/kitchen, bathroom or stairs, or before opening a cupboard, though I feel other memories of the experience will haunt me for a long time. It is only now the nightmare has stopped that I, and my neighbours can really realise how it had affected us: how we dreaded our homes and had cut ourselves off from everyone - friends old and new, family - because of the shame of bringing them home.

## **Irene's Story**

### **Episodes from a life living poverty**

I have always lived poverty, and so have my mother and father before me. All around it was the same. All my life I had no sense of self worth. When I was at school I really wanted to work in a library for deaf people - my headmaster told me 'You'll never be able to do that job'. I didn't even try. One person did help me - a student teacher. She really encouraged me and

I got a job - this was because someone had seen that I was worth something and I that I had some self-worth.

My mother was an alcoholic. She used to turn up at work demanding money from me. The shame of that was too much and I left. After that I just did menial jobs. I got married at 17 to a very immature man. I had 5 children. After 14 years he left. For 6 years I had been an alcoholic. I went to AA and from the first meeting, 26 years ago, I have not touched a drink.

In the early 80's my mother was ill. I nursed her for 5 years - really, really wanting her to accept me, and show some affection, but she didn't. I have spent most of my life as a carer.

One day I went into a community school where I live and one of the women there said 'you'd make a good housing counsellor'. Oh do, I said, 'I couldn't do anything like that.' But I got talking to another chap and we decided to set up a residents' association, which we did and began to advise people about their housing problems. One of the workers in housing asked me if I wanted to go on a course 'Oh do' I said, 'I couldn't do anything like that.'

### **Community Activism**

But I did. We had a campaign about people living in tower blocks, especially the elderly and we saw what was needed was a community garden. I managed to get access to 75,000 pounds of funding. I was thrilled about this (so was everyone). Up until then I had always seen housing officers or those in authority as intimidating. My attitude was 'No-one's going to get to me'. This changed as I went on to do other things.

I wanted to get a job as a community development worker, this is where I saw myself going. I enjoy helping people, and I managed to get a job as a community development worker.

I was thrilled to bits. I had never seen myself going down this road, and here I was, I had. But it ended - following the most appalling incident.

On the estate I live on, some social workers got zealous about child abuse - it was fashionable. In this case it was satanic abuse<sup>5</sup>. Seventeen children were removed from their homes one dawn. I knew the families having lived alongside them for so long. There was no way there was satanic abuse. The families were given no information, support or anything. It was awful.

I started campaigning along with two of the local councillors, for the children to be given back. This was a very public campaign. One day I got a phone call from my line manager asking me not to speak to the press because this was 'rattling some cages in the hierarchy'. I had been involved with the TV, papers and so on, - what they had done to the families was disgusting.

But I worked for the Council. Even so, my first allegiance was to the people I lived with, and I told my line manager she was too late as I would be in the press that week. The campaign went on and 9 months later the children were returned. No apology and the families were not allowed to go for compensation. All they did was to remove some of the staff involved so the whole thing could die a death quietly. I wouldn't allow it. I kept bringing it up. My contract renewal was coming up, and surprise, surprise, it was not renewed. I had essentially been sacked. Even today I am seen as a threat to the Council. Given the choice, though, my loyalties lie with people living poverty - this is one of the things about living the poverty you're working with. We can't go home at the end of the day, or the weekends. We have to live with work we do and its effects on people. There is no way I would ever chose my job if this meant I couldn't speak out about what authorities do that is wrong.

One of the worst things is that they - services, professionals and so on, wont acknowledge their faults.

### **Whose the one with the problem?**

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<sup>5</sup> This series of events was widely (and negatively) reported in the national print and broadcast media at the time

A more recent saga involves me, my granddaughter, her half sister and social services. One day I got a phone call from social services to take the girls into care. Both children had problems, one had horrendous problems - they came from a dysfunctional family. I was encouraged to take out a 'residence' order. The minute I took out the residence order Social Services walked away. I kept phoning Social Services and begged them to give me and the girls some support. All they said was 'We can't - you're the sole guardian, you must carry on.'  
(With a residence order I got no financial help at all.)

Now, I'm not a professional, I need someone to help me with difficult youngsters, I need support. The eldest girl had violent tantrums and she even pulled a knife on her sister. I went to the Doctor who said he could do nothing. If she did not want to see a psychiatrist under the terms of the Mental Health Act, then there was nothing he could do. Hew gave me a prescription for anti-depressants.

What was I meant to do? Chill out and let her kill someone or herself?

Eventually one of my daughters phoned Social Services and said I needed help and if someone did not come round the girls would have their bags packed and be left at the Social Services office. 10 minutes later a social worker came round. She talked to the girl who had pulled a knife upstairs and that was that.

After 9 years the girls' mother came on the scene again. I asked for supervised access as I knew there would be trouble and the girls would be upset - the mother was most of the problem. 'We can't, they're too old' they said. After the first meeting with her mother (which I think is a good thing, they should know their mother) the eldest girls wrecked her bedroom.

At this time my 6 year old grandson died suddenly, and I couldn't cope. I was not in this world I was so stressed. I asked Social Services to find some accommodation for the eldest girls but was fobbed off. I was given a leaflet to phone for a bereavement counsellor, and some more anti-depressants.

In February this year the girls ran away to the little one's father and his wife (who had physically and mentally abused her before). They wanted so much to be accepted and had

had rejection all their lives. I told the social worker one of them would not stay more than a week and she didn't. Social services gave her the number of the Samaritans and Childline and sent her on her way. She ended up in a night shelter - I gave the social worker a rollicking when I found out. I said that I wanted the child put in a place where she can get the support she needs. She was now in a homeless unit. Things went to court and I managed to argue for a Guardian ad litem for her.

Now I know some of the stops where I can go. I know some of the doors I can knock on, but I didn't get an answer. What happens to those that don't know?

### **What can be done?**

I strongly believe professional that work in a deprived area should take time to live in the community and feel the needs of the people, which are many fold. Living poverty is not just about money: it is opportunities, and it is chances, and it is being treated like human beings and being listened to. People in deprived areas are wary of professionals. One activist friend of mine used to say, when there were professionals around: 'here they come, the failed academics. They're going to help us and put everything right for us when they've not got a bloody clue.'

We don't need your help. We would welcome your support. That's what must be overcome.

## **Carolyn's story**

### **Bearing witness to living poverty**

I have known Angela for about 6 years and Irene for over 2. Angela had initially contacted me via a newspaper article about another psychologist. She invited me to meet with her and a group of local women who were beginning a women's action group on a peripheral estate. The group wanted their struggles witnessed, and possibly reported on. They were keen that I should be able to use their experiences, as women living poverty, in teaching and work with students so that their lives were visible to those who may move into professional positions in

the future. I was asked to spend time with them, hear and see some of the things that happened to them and let others know about their lives.

Over time I have spent time with the group and with individual members of the group; discussed events and particular difficulties with the women; been introduced to other residents on the original and other estates; offered insights and suggestions at times that have been taken up and used, or rejected as the residents have seen fit; attended meetings and contributed to strategy discussions over particular campaigns and issues; undertaken - sometimes with students- action research studies over particular resident-based strategies for local change; written articles or conference papers, and spoken to journalists about particular fights and the strengths people have brought to bear on their dealings with services, professionals and the ways policies are implemented; assisted with using formal complaints procedures; attended celebrations and a funeral; collected information about how some public bodies wield their power and use their resources to pursue their own agendas; and witnessed direct encounters between residents and professionals.

As a result I have been enabled and encouraged to work as an ally and in solidarity with those marginalised and who live poverty. I have encountered the life-defining impacts of the distance in life experience between those with privilege and people living poverty. I continue to learn about sources of hope and optimism, power and powerlessness; potential for forming progressive alliances; how professional and authorities (let's assume unwittingly) oppress and diminish the very people they are employed to serve; the ability of committed activists as well as more diffident women to build campaigns and actions using both orthodox and unorthodox methods, and the barriers they encounter; the ways in which policies, whilst meeting political goals, often fail to address the most important things of people's lives; the arrogance and disdain in which poor people are viewed and treated by a range of different professionals; the dangerousness of participatory and/or consultation mechanisms that do not work.

On the one hand my sense of injustice is confirmed and strengthened but on the other, my sense of humility in the face of the dignity, resilience and strength of those living poverty is overwhelming. I cannot rescue people from poverty, nor am I asked to 'help' individuals groups in the face of systemic oppression. Instead, I can work in solidarity with those living poverty and join with them in protest against poverty. I can use some of the resources I have

as a person of privilege to contribute towards social transformation This is not my - or their - or our struggle alone, but part of a world-wide movement, with many fronts, against poverty and in solidarity with those living poverty.

## **Discussion**

These stories (were intended to) illustrate that some of the difficulties and sources of oppression for people living poverty are created by the very institutions that are supposed to support people in moving beyond poverty. There are few documented studies of experiences of this sort. However, Nicolas and JeanBaptiste, (2001) collected accounts of women living in the USA within the national assistance programme, and report similar experiences.

*Most of the participants discussed the process of entering the system as 'degrading', devaluing' and belittling'. ... although they are much older than most of the workers in the offices, they are often talked to 'as if we are children'... (they) discussed their shame at being in the system .. (and) ... the lack of societal acceptance of women who are on public assistance' (p. 304-5)*

In the face of the public, human service organisations and professionals, and from positions of frustrations, exhaustion and sometimes despair, women living poverty manage. They show great resilience in the face of adversity.

## **What is the role of the Community Psychologist?**

Community Psychology is a discipline with a radical agenda, committed to action and social change and to active contributions to social transformation in order to achieve greater social justice for all (see for example Nelson and

Prilleltensky, in press, 2004; Seedat et al., 2001). Faced with I and A's stories, we can anticipate lots of ideas for participative prevention and for action. We are committed to this type of community psychology. However, we suggest that it may be useful for community psychologists - and indeed other professionals- to learn from other radical movements for social change, and find the space to work in a different way. To work, not in terms of using our expertise to identify what must change and how; not in terms of using our research skills to investigate what is and why; not to listen as part of a needs assessment prior to designing (participatively or not) an intervention or research project; not to listen in order to minimise, re-frame or sympathise with our 'clients', and deny their despair and their suffering. No, we are suggesting a process of walking alongside, listening to and witnessing the realities of the lives of people living poverty - a process of *accompaniment*.

*Accompaniment* derives from the human rights and social development fields (Mahoney and Eguren, 1997). It comes, in part from liberation theology<sup>6</sup>, the precursor to liberation psychology (Martín Baró, 1994), but we are not referring to it here in a religious sense - although it is debatable if we are meaning it in a spiritual sense. For example, in areas of human rights abuses, international observers live alongside those most at risk of abuse, violence, torture, even death, in order to learn, support, show solidarity, witness and possibly to shield.

As Gates, (1998) says:

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<sup>6</sup> The liberation theology approach to accompaniment is usually attributed to Archbishop Romero (1979, 1980) who accepted the challenge to be the voice of the poor (*la voz de los sin voz*), eventually literally laying down his life for those amongst whom he lived

*Accompaniment literally means to walk with or alongside people ... (it) is also an act of friendship, and ultimately a mechanisms for building solidarity. ... Accompaniers also can play an important role in listening to and transmitting the stories of those voices who might not otherwise be heard. ... to provide a measure of security to at-risk populations ... as observers and witnesses"*

She goes on to outline some of the gains for her, working in human rights accompaniment in Guatemala:

*... I can begin to appreciate the amount of work it takes for them just to survive, just to grow and prepare enough food to eat for the family. ... I continue to be impressed with their willingness to keep fighting. They are tired, but their vision of a new community is too strong and too present for them to give up the struggle ... you can grow to love a community, a people, so much that you feel incapable of abandoning them..*

In addition to the human rights field, *accompaniment* also appears in some of the social development literature as a key role played by development NGOs. For example, Oxfam, lists *accompaniment* as one of its eleven key development roles. Accompaniment is described as witnessing, voicing, etc and stands separate from broker/facilitator, advocacy, capacity building and education (Pacific Programme Strategy, 2000). Some advocates of accompaniment suggest it should always be non-partisan , but we would

suggest that in our context, Romero's<sup>7</sup> (1980) 'preferential option for the poor' over those more powerful, is the only viable position to take. This means that we must position ourselves at the side of the poor, and, at times side with poor people as they struggle to get by.

There is little information about accompaniment published in the academic literature, but drawing from the human rights and development fields, the process of accompaniment can be seen to involve:

- A close and continuous relation;
- Being based on dialogue;
- Being by invitation;
- Spending time with people in different situations;
- Offering specific, flexible and strategic support;
- Witnessing;
- Listening
- Voicing and transmitting stories of the accompanied
- Monitoring and alerting the wider community to abuses;

Accompaniment requires:

- Having to let go of our, the accompaniers' needs to strategize on behalf of those accompanied;

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<sup>7</sup> Whilst the 'preferential option for the poor' within liberation theology and liberation psychology is often attributed to Romero (1980), in his text he acknowledges its source as emanating from the discussions of the second and third conferences of Latin American Bishops at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). The document arising from the Puebla conference had a section entitled 'Preferential Option for the Poor'. In the document's conclusions, it was stated (para 1134: "We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation."

- That we accept we are not in a position to propose solutions of problems;
- Being open to the impact of the experience;
- Being able to experience the pain and struggle of the accompanied.

We are not suggesting that the situation of people living poverty in the UK is the same as those living in fear of their lives through the non-observance of human rights in what Pilger calls 'lesser developed nations'. We are suggesting, though, that people living poverty in the UK are risk of oppression - and suppression- by the very institutions and professions that are there to support them in moving from poverty. They are also equally invisible to the world around them. Thus the process of accompaniment is one that may enable us to take a step back, to understand the experience of those living poverty and to scrutinise our own disciplines and practices in the light of this understanding. Such accompaniment opens the way to solidarity with those living poverty and to joining with them to protest against poverty. As we have said from the outset, such a position is inevitably a political one, a view supported by Gutierrez (1988: 173), who says

*...the solidarity and protest of which we are speaking have an evident and inevitable "political" character insofar as they imply liberation. To be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor.*

It is difficult to engage in such accompaniment within the current organisation of psychological services, and we have to take seriously the proposition that the discipline and practices of psychology may, themselves, be part of the

oppressor. . Having said this, though, with personal commitment, moving towards such a practice may be possible. At the very least, accompaniment of this sort requires

- Commitment
- Time
- Openness and willingness to learn
- Negotiation of and joint reflection on relationships as they change over time
- Independence from agency allegiances and responsibilities
- Patience
- Sense of humour
- The ability to listen and hear in non-judgemental ways
- A flexible approach to and understanding of more familiar interpersonal boundaries, including, amongst others, those of 'friend', 'helper', 'client', 'expert', 'facilitator'
- Continual reconsideration of ethical judgements

Becoming an ally (Bishop, 2002) and commitment are the starting points for accompaniment, as well as for solidarity and protest. Again, Gutierrez argues something similar in relation to liberation theology, but given the lack of visible interest in poverty by psychology and psychologists outlined at the start of the paper, we would suggest his comments could equally apply if we substitute 'psychology' for 'theology'.

*Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary*

*for a theological (for which read psychological) discussion of poverty. The absence of a sufficient commitment to the poor, the marginated, and the exploited is perhaps the fundamental reason why we have so solid contemporary reflection on the witness of poverty. (p. 173)*

As part of the repertoire of roles and practices available to community psychologists, accompaniment has the potential to be an important one that gives those living poverty visibility within psychology, and that might underpin the direction and style of both intervention and research. Accompaniment may help us begin to understand, even if we cannot know what living poverty is like, for as Adaboya (2003), from Ghana suggests,

*Poverty is like heat: you cannot see it; so to know poverty you have to go through it*

Some of us are lucky enough not to have to go through it: we can however, bear witness to some of those who do. Despite our community psychological preferences for action and for change, sometimes the best we can do is to 'accompany' those seeking to change things for themselves.

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