

Community Psychological Perspectives and Work with People with Learning Difficulties

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Abstract

Community psychology suggests a practice that focuses, not on the individual person and their competence and abilities, but rather on the wider context of their lives. We discuss this in relation to the of social exclusion and marginality typically experienced by people with learning difficulties, and key community psychological concepts of *value-based practice and the emphasis on social change, natural systems* (the ecological metaphor and whole systems perspectives), *psychological sense of community, and the creation of social settings*. We then discuss three major strategies of intervention: the *furtherance of critical consciousness, the creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings)*, and the development of alliances and counter systems. These approaches all imply a participant-reflective stance.

Introduction

It is not possible to write about any one community psychology, as, indeed, community psychology differs in different parts of the world, and has a low presence in the UK (Burton & Kagan, 2003). Nevertheless, it is possible to delineate a broadly community psychological perspective that is distinct from most other forms of psychological practice. In this paper we will consider a community psychological perspective on the understanding of social exclusion and social marginalisation, central to the experiences of many people with learning difficulties in the UK. We will suggest a practice that focuses, not on the individual person and their competence and abilities, but rather on the wider context of their lives. We will suggest some key concepts and characteristics of community psychological perspectives and illustrate what these might mean for a shift in emphasis.

Social exclusion and marginalisation

Over the last decade there has been a growing interest in the concept of social exclusion, particularly by the UK Government that in 1997 established a *Social Exclusion Unit*. As the ODPM (2004) says:

Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

There is debate about whether social exclusion is a useful concept (Levitas, 1996; Room, 1995), or whether social exclusion is really referring to poverty or/and oppression. In all these debates, little mention has been made, other than in passing to disabled people (Beresford and Green, 1996), and it is more than poverty that excludes disabled people and those with learning difficulties in particular. Their exclusion - and potential for inclusion - is intertwined with the history and practice of welfare organisations, and political and social attitudes, beliefs and behaviour (Burton & Kagan, 1995). Elsewhere we have explored the experience and social processes of *marginalisation* in relation to the lives of people with learning difficulties (Kagan & Burton, 2004).

Marginalization is at the core of exclusion from fulfilling and full social lives at individual, interpersonal and societal levels. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them; they may become stigmatised and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes. Their opportunities to make social contributions may be limited and they may develop low self-confidence and self esteem. Social policies and practices may mean they have relatively limited access to valued social resources such as education and health services, housing, income, leisure activities and work. The impacts of marginalization, in terms of social exclusion, are similar, whatever the origins and processes of marginalization, irrespective of whether these are to be located in social attitudes (such as towards impairment, sexuality, ethnicity and

so on) or social circumstance (such as closure of workplaces, absence of affordable housing and so on).

Although people with learning difficulties are relatively invisible in the policy and legislative agendas of social exclusion-inclusion, over the past 25 years a movement for inclusion has developed. In the UK this process has culminated in the recent White paper *Valuing People (DoH, 2001)* which puts the participation of people with learning difficulties and their families at the heart of policy and practice, with a view to moving towards greater social inclusion. Inclusion in *what*, remains a pragmatic and ethical issue.

The above picture of the marginalisation and exclusion of people with learning difficulties, and a push to participation, is a community psychological one, stressing the historical, social attitudinal, ideological and legislative context that frames people's lives. It makes no mention of people's impairments, educational level, IQ, functional abilities or family dynamics.

Key community psychological concepts

Some key community psychological concepts, have been introduced, namely *marginalisation*, *exclusion-inclusion* and *participation*. Other key concepts we will explore are *value-based practice*, the emphasis on *social change*, *natural systems* (the ecological metaphor and whole systems perspectives), *psychological sense of community*, and *the creation of social settings*.

Value-based practice

The idea of value based practice is familiar to many working within services for people with learning difficulties, and this is partly reflected in the title of the White Paper. Community psychology, too is a value-based practice. Values are a way of stating, measuring or assessing the worth of something – in this case our community psychological intentions, interventions, actions and reflections. This is a change in emphasis beyond the focus on valued outcomes for people with learning difficulties. There is broad agreement about the value base of community psychology, but it is described differently by different writers, largely as a reflection of their local contexts (see broad discussion by Prilleltensky, 2001). We have articulated a broad based conceptualisation based on the key values of justice_which underpins rights; stewardship, which underpins duties; and community which underpins hopes and desires (e.g. Kagan, 2002).

An emphasis on social change

A community psychological perspective is constructional rather than pathological in orientation (Goldiamond, 1974), but it also aspires to change social relations and social systems. That is to say it is radical in the sense of getting to the root of social and psychological problems rather than merely bandaging the casualties. Inevitably the emphasis on transformation can often be more a hope than a reality, but the contribution of psychologists to the rethinking of the identity and value of people with learning difficulties (for instance in terms of expectations, emotional life, and contributions they can

make) has clearly contributed to the improved situation over the last 50 years. Our own conception of *Prefigurative Action Research* (Kagan & Burton, 2000) provides a framework for understanding and creating linkages between local change projects and more wide scale social change.

Natural systems: the ecological metaphor and whole systems perspectives

Taking an ecological perspective, means taking the 'person-in-context' as the unit of analysis and change. This is more than a careful analysis of the immediate environment, familiar to clinicians as ecological analyses. Instead, context is understood to be multi level, and multi-dimensional. Thus, following the ecological metaphor, community psychologists are widely agreed that systems analyses are required, both as catalysts to understanding but also as guides to action and intervention.

Systems are not to be seen as static, concrete entities, but rather as social environments that can be both oppressive and supportive and that change over time. Any particular part of a social system can be, at the same time, oppressive and supportive. For example, families, health and welfare agencies, hospitals, neighbourhood regeneration policies and institutions, schools, all provide support to enable people to maintain identity, secure material resources and at times resist the consequences of oppression. However, the bureaucratic and dehumanising effects of health and welfare provision, the socialisation of children for the demands of the labour market, the apathy following the failures to influence local decision making, for

example, are all features of oppression.

A community psychological perspective might look for the potential for enhancing the supportive features of some (elements) of the systems in the interests of the people. One way is through the deliberate creation of what is known as an 'ecological edge' (Mollinson, 1991; Odum, 1971) wherein the common interests of both groups are found and energy and resources are maximised. (See Burton & Kagan, 2000; Choudhury & Kagan, 2000 for applications of this concept to community psychology.)

The Psychological Sense of Community and the Creation of Social Settings

A key concept in community psychology is that community is not simply a physical location, but is defined through social and psychological relations of belonging and identity (or conversely through exclusion and alienation). Sarason (1974) used the term the psychological sense of community to capture this. This implies a relatively sophisticated way of understanding what community is, that can help with the practical process of trying to create meaningful ties with people who lack them (Burton & Kagan, 1995). Working community psychologically would be to get involved in the creation of new settings (which can be anything from a temporary group to an intentional community) rather than accepting to work in the present social arrangements (Sarason, 1972).

Relevant community psychological strategies

Given the key community psychological concepts outlined above, we will now turn to some strategies for intervention from a community psychological perspective. As we have argued, community psychology would look to social change, at multiple levels, rather than individual change in a static context. Change strategies, therefore are designed to lead to system changes, which incorporate individual change.

Here we will offer three major strategies of intervention (each of which could incorporate different methods): (1) furtherance of critical consciousness, (2) creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings), and (3) development of alliances and counter systems. These strategies are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Furtherance of Critical Consciousness

A key task of community psychological interventions is an educational one, requiring a process that is characterised by dialogue between people, leading to greater 'conscientization'. Freire and Faundez, (1989) demonstrate the process whilst discussing the process in a 'talking book'. It is by sharing our perceptions of the world that we can begin to have dialogue, and unite different kinds of knowledge (Francescato & Tomai, 2001). Consequently, we all become more aware of our place in it and the possibilities for constraint

and change.

This assumes that “radical change can only come from consciousness developed as a result of exchange rather than imposition” (Leonard, 1975 p. 59). The learner assumes the role of knowing subject in dialogue with the educator, so reality is demythologised: those who had been ‘submerged’ in oppressive social relations begin to understand these relations and the ideology that hides them, so recasting their social role with critical awareness.

In this we need to be prepared for our ‘expert’ knowledge to be challenged and seen to be incomplete. Nevertheless, our ‘expert’ voice can be used to speak with others, negotiate a common understanding and also to authenticate the voices of others.

Creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings)

As an intervention for change, conscientization will be relatively weak unless it is group conscientization. Leonard (Leonard, 1975 p. 60) summarises the advantages of the group:

The development of a critical consciousness, by which the demystification of political structures and economic relations takes place, enables a group and the individuals within it to assert their own humanity and to confront dehumanization systems.

By linking people together with others who share their experiences, or who are allies in wanting to fight to eliminate sources of oppression, radical

community psychologists can work to develop dialogical relationships, within new social settings, which enable group conscientization, and possibilities for change. The facilitation and development of self advocacy groups, through which people begin to understand the ideological and policy contexts of their oppression (Goodley, 1998; Skelton and Moore, 1999) and the linking of these groups to wider civil rights movements, is a process of conscientization. We note that this runs against the individualistic emphasis in current policy and practice guidance (DoH, 2001). This at times confuses the struggle against exclusion and for power and control with an emphasis on individual self-determination that owes its inspiration to the ideological image of the individual worker-consumer in a free market.

Once more, in community psychology as we understand it, the power of the group over the individual is emphasised as is finding ways of enabling people to come together in new ways to share experiences and stories about their lives and their dreams in order to make changes (Melluish & Bulmer, 1999).

Development of alliances and counter systems

Whilst collective action and the development of trust between people might harness individual energies, they may burn themselves out if they are not connected to the wider system in which they are living. This might be to link with other like groups, bringing in greater resources and greater strength in solidarity. It may also be the linking with other parts of the system that can supply resources or expertise and thus strengthen the group (Kagan, 1993,

1997; Kagan, Lawthom, Knowles, & Burton, 2000) (cf. the ecological edge metaphor above).

Community psychologists have emphasised coalition building and community collaboration (Dowrick & Keys, 2001) as methods of intervention. We go further to suggest that alliances united by a shared vision can change and have changed systems (Burton & Kagan, 1996). An example of this is sustained work, throughout the 1980s up to the mid 1990s in the North West of England that united parents, professionals, politicians, people with learning difficulties, academics and NGOs to transform a whole service system (Kagan, 1997). Not only do alliances increase strength for change, they also increase the likelihood that change will be sustainable (Burton, 1989). These kinds of alliances are what Leonard (1975) suggests are required to build a counter system: that is, a power base from which some change in the existing system can take place. This formation of alliances can also be seen as both the formation of new social settings and as a type of social movement (Sanchez, Cronick and Wiesenfeld, 1988).

Conclusion

Dowrick and Keys (2001) suggest community psychological work on disability issues involves action research which includes (1) disabled people having a voice; (2) people with expertise in generating resources assisting that voice and (3) creating action that makes an empowering difference in the lives of the disabled people. As we have argued, though, a social analysis sees empowerment as a social and not an individual phenomenon. It should

be clear that working community psychologically is not to take the role of an objective bystander. A value based practice for social change in the direction of greater social justice, the understanding of marginalisation, inclusion and systems perspectives all demand a participant-reflective stance. At the core of community psychological work is involvement and immersion of the professionals and continual, critical reflection.

Table 1: Strategies for intervention and implications for community psychological praxis

Strategy for intervention	Community psychological work with people with learning difficulties
Furtherance of critical consciousness	Working to develop dialogical relationships, which enable group conscientization, and possibilities for change? Sharing 'expert' voices and remaining open to learning. Understanding experience from the person's point of view, listening and enabling people to get together to share common concerns and solution. For example, health awareness groups, citizen and self-advocacy. Education, hobby and leisure opportunities and participation in local campaigns (for example to keep post offices open) and organisations such as civic societies.
Creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings)	Facilitating the bringing together of people with common interests, and their allies, and helping them connect with others for greater power to change. For example self-advocacy groups, linking these to other local civil rights organisations, transport lobby groups, and neighbourhood groups. Developing new projects which seek to include people with learning difficulties and other people, such as residents' associations, park users' groups, walking or fitness groups, arts projects.

Development of alliances and counter systems	Working to develop alliances that will challenge the status quo, build a counter system and form part of wider emancipatory social movements. For example, facilitating links between user groups and local women's groups; combining pressure for better continence services with environmental campaigns around personal hygiene products; enabling people with learning difficulties to make links with other groups of marginalised people through the internet; linking with local campaigns and information projects around unemployment and contributing to national and international movements on labour conditions.
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