

AGM Community Psychology Section Talk

Carolyn Kagan and Mark Burton

Is there a future for community psychology in the UK?

We are both on the point of retirement and have spent considerable parts of our working lives practising, writing about and promoting CP in the UK. In different ways we have both been a part of and catalysed significant changes in people's lives and the organisations in which we work – CK from a University base and MB from a public services base. Much of what we have learnt we have written about over the years.

But simply applying what we've learnt to the current situation and context is unlikely to work, because:

- we are at a particular historical moment and, as we know, every context is different;
- There has been a recent change in the complexity and nastiness of the wider environment;
- The organisations in which we work are now less benign and our tools of analysis and operation may no longer be adequate.

When we discussed the question '**is there a future for CP in the UK?**, we arrived at the answer(s) 'yes, definitely; no, unlikely, well maybe, but...'. It is the well, maybe, but that we will discuss today.

The existence of the Section augers well for the future of CP in the UK and we should all be grateful for the time and effort put in by those who have made the section happen.

So, thank you to you all. And thank you for inviting us to address you.

A future orientation requires a solid understanding of the present and commitment to learn from the past. So we will outline some of the challenges we see facing CP, and how we might build upon the past to evolve a relevant and punchy CP.

Gathering Storms

There are a number of gathering storms, of big challenges facing us all. We suggest the following:

Ecological crisis: with climate change and other planetary boundaries being crossed, is likely to lead to collapse of the support systems for human life. As peoples habitats are squeezed we can expect to see more conflicts of the most basic kinds – competition for resources to sustain life.

Energy crisis: with peak oil leading to rapid escalation of energy costs with profound consequences for the economy, agriculture, supply chains, etc. As we are no longer able to live our energy-rich lives we will see profound changes in the ways in which people live together, construct communities and organise work, family and leisure lives

Demographic crisis: with worldwide population growth and in many parts of the world ageing populations but in others missing middle generations, population churn and displacements due to climate shocks, war, economic shocks and neoliberal strategies. As hitherto stable patterns of populations change rapidly, existing social relations will be put under pressure with the dangers of increased violence and exploitation

Economic crisis: a structural crisis of Capital and the undoing of the most recent strategies to maintain accumulation while accentuating strategies that attack living standards, previous gains, ecosystems, livelihoods. Governments' pursuit of economic growth will serve to deepen the crisis.

These crises:

- 1) are **interdependent**, and
- 2) have a **systemic nature** (not easily described, not easily predicted, complex with properties that emerge, non-linear – have feedbacks and subsystems).

- 2) **differentially affect** the poor, women, disabled people, the elderly, children, the working class and those reliant on the informal economy, peasants and members of minority or dominated ethnic groups.
- 3) are **likely to lead to a succession of waves** of misery, conflict, population churn, hunger and want. Much of this 'future' is here already.
- 4) present us with perhaps **OUR greatest challenge – to understand the contribution we as community psychologists can make, and not to get disheartened by the scale of the problems**. Will it be enough to continue to think globally but act locally, or will we need to consider how we upscale our actions and our learning, and join up the fragments?

Transformative Community Psychology?

Community Psychology likes to see itself as transformative, but we need to ask how can it step up to the increasing challenges, at the micro, meso and macro levels? Is the transformative ambition a lot of hot air?

We would suggest that the community psychology literature and evidence from practice makes it abundantly clear that there have been important initiatives that have been transformative in terms of people's lives or local (even regional in some cases) impact. There has, maybe, been relatively little visibility or impact of community psychology at national and international policy levels. The voice, if there at all, is a tiny quiet one.

Perhaps this is not surprising, given the size of CP, not just in the UK but elsewhere. It is a minority endeavour. And perhaps this is the issue upon which the future of CP in the UK will depend.

We have both thought carefully, in different contexts, about how small resources can best be used for change. But, as we said at the start, we cannot rely on our past experiences; we must keep this conundrum constantly under review.

Nevertheless, for us this is a question of *leverage*.

A question of leverage

Community psychology is uniquely placed to supply psychological insight, concepts, tools to actors and disciplines with a stronger track record of work on the major systemic issues but who haven't had the benefit of a psychological or community psychological. Problems of human society are problems that require social action, by subjects, by actors, and psychology is the science for understanding the bases of human action and understanding and the barriers to social action

Of course, we will have to keep questioning and challenging the assumptions, concepts and tools of psychology from the reference point of the oppressed and marginalised, as part of a constructive process for a better psychology.

Community Psychology in the UK is a small resources and the task is one of focusing on how to make the most of this resource – as individual practitioners, as a sub-discipline and as a formal organisation.

We can think of Community Psychology as a *bridging discipline*, with the potential to:

- **Supply complex social psychological understanding** to other disciplines, to policy, and to social movements.
- Bring a community perspective to psychology itself, helping to correct its individualism and its value neutrality, **bringing subaltern perspectives into the heart of the discipline.**

This simple prescription has a number of implications. Here are some...

Curriculum development

Make Community Psychology a core element of the undergraduate curriculum and make sure the psychology benchmarking statements go beyond the individual, interpersonal and group levels.

Ensure that Community Psychology courses have adequate coverage of such essentials as systems and stakeholder analyses, communication skills, conflict management and negotiation, and that they are firmly embedded and engaged with projects outside the universities . If we are helping students to actually make community psychological interventions, maybe there is more work to be done to identify the skills and tools they will need – complex tools such as organisational development, building partnerships, advocacy, accompaniment and so on. Students (and indeed ourselves) in the future will need to understand how to make things happen in new-style organisations and this might include organisational analyses, techniques of management, motivation, leadership, supervision, and so on.

We cannot consider curriculum issues without considering pedagogy. Engaged pedagogies offer some ways forward for evolving our approaches to learning and teaching. At the very least we need to try and bring our practice into our teaching and use some of the methods of engagement in the field to engage with students. ‘Conscientisation’ or political awareness raising could be a valid learning outcome of CP courses, and this fits with the sustainability in Higher Education agenda that is topical just now. These kinds of initiatives come and go but they provide opportunities to be grasped for progressive developments.

Research and practice

Retain an action focus but develop better understanding about what collaboration and participation might mean in the context of CP work. We have made great strides in getting qualitative methods accepted (if not always seen as acceptable) as a part of psychology. However, we must now develop methods that go beyond those that rely on language and people’s limited abilities to articulate complex experiences. Instead, we will have to find ways of tapping into people’s everyday ways of experiencing and reflecting upon the world. We need a programme of development of action research methods, and we also need to see how other methods of research and psychological practice could be harnessed

to the objectives of CP – the issue driving the method and not the method driving the practice.

Professional Organisation

As we said, the Section is an advance and a timely achievement, offering possibilities for steps forward in community psychology. However, there is a danger we should guard against of expending too much time and effort on internal matters, instead using the Section to lever Community Psychology into policy arenas, and linking with other community practices (of which we have a number in the UK).

Mutual support

We know it is hard working at the progressive margins of psychology and often isolating. It is, too, for those people we work with who are trying to create and sustain change. Again, we might be able to learn from our practice some techniques and systems of support that we could apply to ourselves – and vice versa. We might find support from each other, but we might also find support alongside other citizens. As well as the hard stuff we need to have some fun.

If we do nothing else, maybe we should all join a singing group!

Diversity

Community psychology is rich in the diverse perspectives that are brought in from around the world..... including the good N American stuff. This presents us with opportunities to be seized – to find out about ideas and practices from other places, and to share our own experiences. There is quite a challenge ahead to enable work in Italian, Spanish, German, Portuguese, for example, to be available to those of us with limited language skills. There is quite a challenge to hear about work going on all over the world that is NOT written up for publication. We need to cease relying on the work that gets published (in English) or the places that get represented in international or other conferences. Some people do not have access to English language publishing (or indeed any publishing) and some places do not get represented at

conferences. Internet communication (email, skype, etc. and others evolving all the time) tantalises with possibilities for discovering and maintaining contact with new people. But of course, technologically based, on-line learning communities are seductive but will rarely the power of association through face to face contact.

Collaborations and alliances

If we are to use the small CP effectively we must, maybe, think more carefully about collaborating and allying with other groups or movements. Maybe not wholesale, but certainly in relation to particular issues. To do this we will need to be able to identify the best allies for a particular issue. There is a considerable challenge ahead, for example, in even identifying those with whom it would make sense to join together, to take the lessons learnt from our small scale practice in our corners of the world and upscale it to become a part of something bigger. Collaboration in the competition for resources (not just for people, but for projects, organisations such as health services, universities and so on, businesses, too!) is tricky and needs skill if successful collaborations are to last over time.

Critical self awareness

In our models of community psychology, a central place is given to self-awareness. Now, more than ever, we advocate for the importance of continual reflection on our personal and group strengths, real limitations, potential, motivation and interests. Self awareness enables us to operationalise our values, and underpins tactical and strategic choices that we make about how to work, on what issue and with whom. Strengthening our reflexive capabilities will afford us a measure of adaptive flexibility that we see as lacking in some practice, but that will be required in the future more than ever before.

Self awareness requires a degree of openness on all of our parts and the Section is well placed to develop a wider range of tools for reflexivity.

We wish the future of community psychology in the UK well, and you will almost certainly continue to hear from or about us as we continue to

pursue the political goals of community psychology, liberated from our institutional bases.