**Community leadership in Research: Accounts of community activism.
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Introduction

Who are we? Angela (Chair of Daisy Bank TARA) and Carolyn (Community
psychology Team, MMU). Simona was a postgraduate community
psychology intern at MMU during 2005,having just finished studying at the
University of Bologna in Italy.

Location of the work

North Manchester - an area which contains the district that topped the league
of areas of multiple deprivation in England in 2005. Collyhurst, Newton Heath
and Hulme.

Participatory research

Bennet and Roberts (2004) identified two strands of research that have paved
the way for participatory resrach with those living poverty. They identify
'emancipatory research', as developed by the disabled people's movement
Barnes, 1992; 2005). This approach makes explicit and takes on the power
relations involved in research, and through the control of disabled people, to
change the 'social relations of research production'.   The second strand they
identify is 'user involvement ' research, wherein those people who use (mostly
health and social care) services have more say in their design and delivery.
Within this movement, user-led research gives those who use services
greater control over the research undertaken (Lowes and Hulatt, 2005; Turner
and Beresford, 2005). Emerging from these two traditions, then is
participatory research. In the field of community work and development,
however, participatory processes have a longer history, particularly in terms of
action research within development projects (Chambers, 1994; Wadsworth,
1998).

Participatory research in poverty has ranged from giving poor people a voice
(e.g. Narayan, Patel, Rademacher, Scafft and Koche-Smith, 2001) to projects
which give greater control to poor people over the research process and the
messages to be conveyed (Beresford , Green, Lister, and Woodard, 1999).
IN addition there has been work that emerged from partnership between poor
people and others (Commission on Poverty, 2000; ATD Fourth World, 1999).

What is participatory research?
We can see that participatory research may be giving a voice to people who would otherwise not be heard (Maguire, 1987), right through to people having direct control over the whole research process. We can, then, think of participatory research as a continuum:

1. Voice
2. 1 plus: Partnership in decision making
3. 2 plus Collaboration in the process
4. 3 plus Involvement in analysis
5. 4 plus Research directed and controlled
6. 5 plus Research fully owned

Participatory research can, then, be described as ' systematic enquiry in collaboration with those affected by an issue for the purposes of education or action for change.' Furthermore, it seeks to "de-elitise and de-mystify research thereby making it an intellectual tool which ordinary people can use to improve their lives". (Tilakaratna , 1990).

As Tilakaratna points out, participatory research must be sharply distinguished from conventional *elitist research,* which treats people as objects of the research process, and in which the questions, methods, analysis and dissemination are all conducted by outside researchers, gazing in on the topic of investigation. Data are extracted from participants for a researcher's purpose and those who did participate are unlikely to ever see the results of the study, or recognise their own contributions to it.

Tilakaratna identifies the following key features of participatory research:

♦   people are the subjects of research: the dichotomy between subject and object is broken
♦   people themselves collect the data, and then process and analyse the information using methods easily understood by them
♦   the knowledge generated is used to promote actions for change or to improve existing local actions
♦   the knowledge belongs to the people and they are the primary beneficiaries of the knowledge creation
♦   research and action are inseparable – they represent a unity
♦   research is a praxis rhythm of action-reflection where knowledge creation supports action
♦   people function as organic intellectuals
♦   there is an built-in mechanism to ensure authenticity and genuineness of the information that is generated because people themselves use the information for life improvement.

Stoecker (1999) suggests that academics follow three approaches to participatory research: the initiator; the consultant and the collaborator. He goes on to suggest that within community change projects, four roles can be distinguished: animator community organizer, popular educator and participatory researcher. The academic may adopt any or none of these roles

alongside those of initiator, consultant or collaborator, depending on her skills and the level of participation needed or wanted by the community.

The key processes of Participatory Research

The promotion of participatory research is basically an exercise in stimulating the people to:

♦   Collect information

♦   Reflect on and analyse it

♦   Use the results as a knowledge base for life improvement, and whenever possible to document the results for wider dissemination ie for the creation of a people's literature

Process of the community activist research

During 2005, the community psychology team at MMU (CK) was approached by the Chair of a local residents' association (AS) who had the idea of recording the stories of community activists. This idea had emerged firstly d from the fact that some long life-long community activist friends had recently died and their testimonies had gone untold; and secondly from the 60th birthday celebrations of another life long activist, during which people had celebrated her achievements. CK and AS had worked together on a number of projects previously, and AS thought that maybe this idea could be turned into a research project, wither with a member of the community psychology team, or with some community -psychology students. After some discussion, it was agreed that the idea would make a good project, but the immediate problem of finding time to work together on the project (especially from University staff) seemed irresolvable.

It happened that a postgraduate community intern (SR) was to spend 9 months with the community psychology team, and that the objectives of this placement included 'to work participatively with a community group on an issue of importance to the group '; 'to gain skills in executing a qualitative research project', and ' to use different sources of information in order to develop understanding of an identified neighbourhood characterised by multiple indicators of deprivation'.

This seemed like an ideal opportunity - a community issue identified by a community group, and the possibility of building in some analysis of the neighbourhood, using multiple sources of information.

Whilst there was a long history of collaboration and joint projects between CK and AS, SR had worked with neither of the others before. It as, therefore, necessary to spend some time getting to know each other and clarifying whether or not a productive project would be possible, and if so, what roles each should take.

SR met AS and other members of the group and spent several visits discussing the research possibilities presented by the idea. During this time CK also explored with both AS how they might all work together, especially as

CK would be unable to be centrally involved. It was agreed that the project would be an interview based project with a small number of activists. Each interview would be filmed and an edited film made of them giving their accounts. SR would work, initially as an assistant to AS, helping her to refine the interview questions, securing the necessary equipment and ensuring that they were both able to use it. AS would recruit participants, brief them as to the purpose and nature of the study and be the interviewer, whilst SR operated the camera and recording equipment. Both AS and SR would have a post-interview discussion with each participant. CK would act as an academic supervisor for SR and occasional discussant for AS.

It was not clarified at the outset, how the analysis would take place. However, through negotiation a process for doing this was agreed.

AS, SR and participants identified central themes within each participants' account. SR then transcribed and undertook a preliminary thematic analysis across all participants, discussing the process of doing this with CK. SR and AS then refined this analysis and decided together how to structure the empirical part of the report and which sections should be edited for the film. SR (with the assistance of a psychology technician) did a first edit of the film and then AS discussed it and together they refined it. SR and AS planned and organised the celebration event and dinner involving everyone connected to the project.

Through separate activity, SR collated information about the three districts referred to by the activists for the first section of the report. She and CK agreed the structure of the report and CK undertook its final edit.

Thus, this research was research in which community activists:
- had the idea;
- identified the research issue;
- secured resources in partnership with the University;
- worked collaboratively to identify and recruit participants;
- decided the research design and format of outputs,
- constructed an interview schedule as a means of collecting accounts,
- collected data,
- analysed data,
- edited film,
- arranged celebration event,
- engaged in dissemination ….

Findings

Getting involved

Some had been involved for a long time in one capacity or another, and talked about how they had been brought up to consider others around them.

It's something to do with the way you have been brought up, and I was brought up there: you look around you and not just what is inside you. (Carlo).

We were brought up to look after one another and so ; I used to think, 'well, if they (old people in the community) were my parents, I'd like to see there was somebody near my parents' (Doris).

The values underpinning their work stemmed from their backgrounds, and most considered that 'helping people ' was central to their lives, although it did not stem from religious convictions.

The activists were critical and somewhat dismissive of those who did not get involved.

I think everybody could be activist really, but there is a lack of interest .. I think if they are not interested in life at all, they just sit in their house doing nothing (Harry).

Daniela considered lack of involvement was due to lack of confidence, but Anne was a little more analytical:

Materialism doesn't give time to be with each other,(Anne)

Staying involved

The activists generally did not wasn't recognition for their work, contradicting the notion that those who get to involved do so for recognition and reward. Staley said:

I don't want any recompense.

This view was echoed by Daniela:

I don't want to be recognised by the community because it's just a satisfaction, at the end of the day, if you get things done.

Sara, however, disagreed.
I think it ought to be recognised. You take your time…it's nice to see a recognition of what you have done…it's important sometimes to see a little reimbursement.

On second thought, Daniela did think that recognition by the authorities would be important, even if not by fellow residents.

With regard to financial recognition, Anne was very clear that this would be the end of volunteering.

I think that when they talk about financial recompense they are not talking about voluntary any more. (Anne).

She did think that recognition in terms of accreditation of skills maybe should be there.

I think there is something about the skills that the people develop when they do the voluntary work - they should have some qualification. (Anne)

Experience of community work

Being involved has been life enhancing in various ways. Sara has become more aware and has learnt from others.

I have become more aware of walking down the street and t seeing that there is litter .. that there is a lot of work to be done and that the councillors should be more responsive of local people and of what they need an what they want. Sara)

Both harry and Stanley (older men) saw their community work as essential parts of who they are:

(community work) keeps you active, active all the time. To be active …it's good, it keeps you gong, keeps you young. (harry)

Doing community work has been an absolute joy for me. I mean it filled my life. You know what I mean filling - I had a wonderful life, I know a lot of people, I'm quite respected wherever I go… (Stanley)

Some of the women thought their involvement changed their relationships with others and took over their lives.

It .. became Saturday, Sunday, seven days a week, 24 hours a day job. I just couldn't focus on anything. All the time on the phone, emails, all kinds of things. I've lost contact with most of the friends I had. (Daniela)

Sometimes I just think I don't do it any more because - sometimes people don't appreciate it (Doris)

Working with others (residents, officials, professionals) is part of the work. Harry thought working with other activists easy.

Very easy. Actually we have got a group - we never had an argument. We all sit together and agree. Harry

Stanley, on the other hand, frequently found himself in arguments.

Different ideas about how to solve a problem - I would think in one way and somebody else would have another different background. Another way - and then we have an argument. Stanley

John too identified some difficulties.

Sometimes it's hard. You want to do something and they want to do something else. John.

Carlo recognised some of the contradictions:

You may be accepted, you may not. You may achieve something, you may not. It depends how you speak to people, how you approach them.. Sometimes it's not as easy, but you just have to (carry on) Carlo

Policy and community involvement

There was disagreement about the extent to which community work is political.

> *"I don't think it (community work) is political because you are just keeping your area clean and tidy"… "So bringing in politics into everything is not the point." (John)*

> *"…but everything is political, life is political"… "all revolves about politics, unfortunately, I can't distinguish one thing from the other"… "Your simple basic human right is linked to politics" (Carlo)*

For Jessica, community work might more often imply a sort of "political attitude" rather than a proper policy. "To be nice", to reach out to other people was considered an aspect of this political attitude.

> *"To be diplomatic and"… "nice and smiling when you want something"… "in some way is political" (Jessica)*

Daniela suggested that community work might become political when activists get involved in local policy. Furthermore, she noted that the Newton Heath team of activists seemed to only include women and consequently, was inherently a feminist issue. For Sara's, however, community involvement might be something to do with policy if it influenced activists' political beliefs.

> *"I think the work becomes political when"… "it changes your direction or your attitudes"… "or your politics, that what would have an effect on you and that you haven't considered before…" (Sara)*

Overview of activists' accounts

Figure 1 illustrates how self awareness and personal backgrounds, including influences and resilience are at the core of community activism. Figure 1: Participatory research: Influences and awareness at the core of the focus of participatory research with community activists, in the context of relationships with researchers.
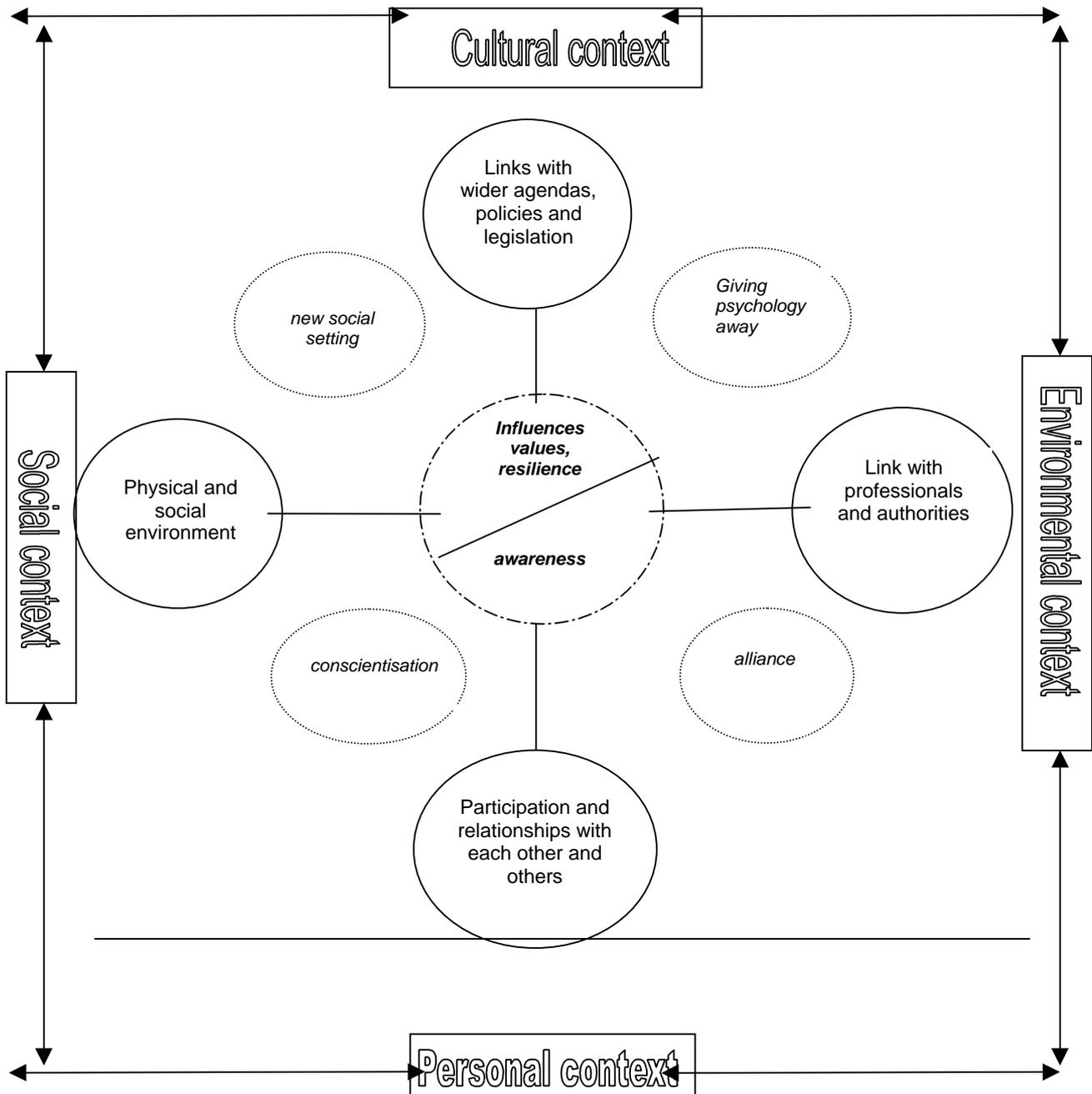
These characteristics hold together the main tasks – to develop new forms of relationships with each other and local people; to forge more positive relationships with professionals and authorities; to change the physical and social environment for the better and to deal with issues arising from social policies and legislations.

The outside professionals work within these tasks to enable alliances to be formed; critical consciousnesss to be developed; new social settings (as in the participatory research itself) to be created and psychological knowledge – in this case research- to be given away.

Overview of participatory research

No all research can and will be participatory. In large part this depends upon the interest and willingness of the non-researchers. For work that is about lived experience, it is best practice to at least explore the possibility that participatory research can be undertaken.

Preparation, support, training if necessary, discussion and collaboration at all stages. The role of the researcher , or as Tilrakaratna describes the 'outside knowledge professional', might be in:

- assisting people to collect data and then to process and analyse the information using simple methods which enables them to systematise their
- linking the local situation (which the people know best) to the larger external situation (about which the outside may know more)
- improving people's access to new information and formal knowledge (eg technology)
- introducing local people to experiences from outside their environment
- throwing up relevant issues or problems for local people to reflect on and analyse and then assisting them in coming to their own conclusions
- disseminating to wider audiences (including policy makers and intellectuals as well as participation workers seeking to facilitate local participation)

The important thing, he argues is that " *the interaction between local people and the outside professional must primarily benefit the people concerned by enabling them to articulate and systematise their own thought processes and thereby enhancing their knowledge base so that the can pursue independent actions.*"

The advantages of participatory research, in addition to enhancing authenticity of information and findings, are to do with conscientisation, capacity building (Hanley, 2005)and enabling greater autonomy as well as the de-mystification of research. This demystification then makes it possible for local people to use research as tool for further life improvement. Participatory research can, in itself, be considered a community psychological intervention. Kagan and Burton (2001) summarise four key features of radical community psychological interventions (see Table 1).

Table 1: Critical Community Psychological Interventions

Strategy for intervention	Community psychological praxis
Furtherance of critical consciousness: education	Community psychologists can work to develop dialogical relationships, which enable group conscientization, and possibilities for change. They must be prepared to share their 'expert' voice and remain open to learning.
Creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings)	Community psychologists can facilitate the bringing together of people with common interests, and their allies, and help them connect with others for greater power to change.
Development of alliances and counter systems	Community psychologists can work to develop alliances that will challenge the status quo, build a counter system and form part of wider emancipatory social movements
Giving psychology away	Community psychologists have opportunities to use psychological knowledge and expertise in liberatory ways: to make concepts and practices accessible and to develop participatory working relationships.

Participatory research, as we have seen, may further critical consciousness; it brings together committed and sensitive researchers with local people, and between local people, in new roles and relationships; links between researchers and local people, or between groups of community self-researchers, can become a strong force for change and a challenge to the status quo; research skills and understanding are transferred to local people through participatory working relationships.

Participatory research is, however, not fully accepted (Khanlou and Peter, 2005). In a recent meeting with some regeneration professionals, who highly value participation of local residents and have created lots of different and creative ways of involving local people, strong opposition to participatory research was expressed. In part this was, they said, because local people did not want to be their own researchers, and difficult and complex dynamics would be set up between them and their fellow citizens if they adopted researcher roles. Yes, participatory research, as all resident participation, does create new roles and introduce new interpersonal dynamics between residents and between the outside professionals and local people (Minkler, 2004). But this can be recognised and worked with (another role for the outside professional, perhaps). However, part of the objection to participatory research in the meeting was what could be described as the adherence to research as a process of mystification. The evaluation officer said:
"*what is the point of research training and doing a PhD if it's all so easy. There's skills to research. It's hard enough to retain distance as trained researcher – it would be impossible as a resident.*"

Perhaps this is an issue about research paradigms and research purpose. The limits to participatory research would be useful to explore.

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