Community Work Today: Competing Demands In Practice

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Introduction

Community work is not a straightforward enterprise, as practitioners well know. For example, it embodies a number of key tensions which create competing and sometimes conflicting demands. This is hardly surprising given the disparate provenance, contested history and diverse contexts of contemporary community work. In fact, it could be argued that what constitutes community work at any time is inevitably the rather messy outcome of contestation between all those interests which seek to frame, deploy or regulate it. It follows, therefore, that the process of contestation, and the dilemmas of choice it generates, produce competing rationalities, although these may not always be explicit. This article explores competing ways of thinking about and justifying professional community work – as distinct from paid or unpaid activism – because they raise important political and educational questions.

Problematising community

Recourse to community has, famously, the capacity to justify policies of right, left and centre and as such has, historically, been an invaluable instrument for the state in all or any of its ideological guises. The ambivalence of community – as a frame through which both maintaining social order and addressing social disadvantage can be enacted – has long been a way of explaining its plasticity and longevity (Shaw, 2008). In other words Community has always accommodated a range of related but contradictory meanings. This potential for providing competing legitimacies for very different interests and purposes is, of course, part of the theoretical problem for policy analysis in this field, but it is also problematic for a practice which is essentially predicated on values of community participation and empowerment.

Part of the problem is undoubtedly caused by the conflation of two largely opposing rationalities, for whilst the progressive discourse of transformation and empowerment has tended to operate at a rhetorical level, it has often concealed a much more conformist and conservative reality (Barr, 1991). This kind of ideological ambivalence also poses challenging questions about the way in which community is contrived in policy and interpreted in practice. It is clear that competing visions of community have consistently jostled for authority within professional discourses, whatever the particularities of context. Certainly the tension between 'the community' singular, as an expression of inclusion and solidarity, and 'communities' plural, as a potentially exclusive experience of difference, is central to an understanding of the complex relationship between theory and practice in community work.

Theory and practice: the continuing debate

A broad distinction is reflected, historically, in the community work literature between what are seen as *instrumental* and *theoretical* models of practice (Popple, 1995; Taylor, 2003). Instrumental approaches in general tend to rely on micro-focussed functional analyses of existing professional processes in order to extract the knowledge required to inform future work. This is often encapsulated in the term 'good practice' or, in these inflationary times, 'best practice' – a model to be replicated or 'rolled out' across a range of diverse contexts. The current emphasis on outcome, competence-based approaches has enabled this functionalist model to be increasingly codified through a 'discrete series of technical accomplishments' which form the 'benchmarks' for professional practice (Shaw and Crowther, 1995). Over time these have become institutionalised in national standards of competency (eg Standards Council for Scotland, 2009). Theoretical models, on the other hand, are supposedly more interested in why community work exists at all, proceeding from an analysis of external socio-economic relations and the contingencies of context in which particular community work practices are constructed and enacted (Cornwall, 2008).

The danger, however, with such broad conceptual distinctions, important though they are, is the temptation to treat them as polarised positions to be defended. In this case

process becomes reified as an end in itself regardless of purpose, and theory is all too easily dismissed as interesting but irrelevant. Some argue that there is a pervasive anti-intellectualism surrounding community work; a suspicion of macro-focused and abstract 'grand theory' which is unfavourably compared with functional knowledge for the 'real world' as it were (eg Ledwith and Springett, 2010). Others, with equal conviction, are concerned that an overemphasis on theoretical work can drive out necessary skills development (egMcConnell, 2013). In the end, if theory does not help illuminate the problems and possibilities of practice, then it is not doing its work. As has been said, there is nothing as practical as a good theory! Notwithstanding legitimate concerns about the correct balance of thinking and doing, it can at least be said that macro explanatory frameworks are vital in order to illuminate and inform both purpose and process in practice. In these terms the idea of 'theorising practice', in which theory and practice problematise each other, may come closest to striking the right balance for a praxis which addresses both how we think about and act on contemporary concerns.

It is widely recognised, for example, that the search for meaningful praxis is futile without an adequate analysis of the ideological recycling in policy of 'community', and the contradictory position of community work practice within the wider politics of the state. If community workers are not to be regarded, and to regard themselves, as mere delivery vehicles, they need to be exposed to the kind of critical thinking which calls into question community work as an historically situated and ideologically contested professional practice. Otherwise, as Giroux (1995:16) warns, they are in danger of lacking a 'frame of reference or a vocabulary with which to articulate the centrality of what they do'. Such a vocabulary is already in danger of being marginalised, if not entirely erased, within the audit and measurement discourse that dominates contemporary community work (Fraser, 2012; Scott, 2012).

At their worst, theoretical models can serve to 'fix' or ossify practice rather than subject it to critical scrutiny. This leads Kirkwood (1990) to suggest that, instead of simply creating rationales for existing practice, theory should offer a resource for 'insight and regeneration of the *world* of practice'. In this way, theory becomes a

means of problematising practice by holding it at arms length for critical scrutiny. Conversely, the world of practice inevitably also makes problems for theory: confronting inadequate explanatory frameworks of social and political reality. For example, the reality of differentiated experience of 'community' has challenged traditional class analysis in ways which enable that analysis to be revised and extended in important ways (Meekosha, 1993). In other words, conceptualising the ways in which 'the personal', experienced at micro level, is constructed and constrained through macro relations of power (as feminists have done) has been a key resource for a practice which is concerned with community empowerment (eg Dominelli, 2006). Anti-racist critiques and those emanating from the disability literature have also honed our understandings of the multi-dimensional nature of power (eg Sondhi, 1997; Oliver, 1990).

At the same time, it becomes impossible to understand the meaning and consequences of neo-liberal globalisation – particularly at local and personal levels – without the metanarratives of capital and class which were so central to the structuralist analysis originally advanced from within the UK Community Development Project (Loney, 1983). Confronting official explanations that poverty and deprivation were caused by social pathology or institutional inertia, they pointed instead to industrial disinvestment and rundown of public services as the primary causal factor, thereby shifting the focus of community work from a sole interest in micro-level change to a recognition that those macro structures and processes which created the context in which poverty and deprivation were inevitable had also to be addressed.

It is self-evidently the case that neither theory nor practice can ever be ideologically innocent, in the sense that they can be isolated from the context in which they operate or from wider political purposes and social interests, and the historical and theoretical resources already at our disposal are invaluable for considering contemporary challenges. They also remind us that practitioners necessarily have to engage critically with values and purposes. In this sense, community work is always both a professional and a political practice.

Community work as a professional practice: the role of the worker

Ambiguity about the boundaries of professional community work has been a predictable outcome of its complex history. As Mayo (1998:164) comments: 'There have been long-running debates on whether or not community work should be defined as professional activity at all, professionalisation having been posed as potentially undermining to community activism and autonomous community movements'. These debates, rehearsed in the literature over time, demonstrate key tensions which have been a continuous feature of community work, specifically in relation to the nature and purpose of practice.

Reviewing the debate over time, Popple (in Shaw, 2004) identifies what he sees as two broad 'camps': 'those who are keen to increase community work's professional status (the technical school)' and 'those who see the potential of community work as part of a movement for greater social change (the radical school)', though he acknowledges that radical workers may use technical approaches to reach their goals. However, since the term 'radical' has become so problematic, particularly in light of its contemporary appropriation in the service of a neo-liberal agenda, Mayo's (1994) distinction between 'technicist' and 'transformational' approaches to *professional* community work may be more useful. The important distinction here is essentially a political one: whereas technicist approaches are framed within 'existing power relations' and are directed towards enabling communities to adapt to 'the world as it is' by, for example, developing resilience to change, transformational approaches are concerned with 'acting on the world' in order to change existing power relations towards greater social justice and equality. In contrast to the former, the latter approach presupposes the possibility of dissent or resistance, not as a problem but, rather, as a positive indication of and contribution to the health and vigour of democratic life.

It seems to me that this also presents a conceptual space within which *different purposes* (as distinct from processes) can be debated and contested - as a legitimate, if not vital, aspect of professionalism. In so doing, it also offers a direct challenge to the notion of the neutral professional who objectively mediates between the formal

institutions of the state and the informal practices of communities. As Thorpe (1985) argues, in her critique of so-called neutrality, the 'unencumbered expert' is simply not an option. The question is, rather, whether values are conscious and made explicit or remain unconscious and implicit. In this respect she makes a useful distinction between 'ideology-as-ism' and 'ideology as hegemony'. In the latter sense, all workers are embedded in social structures and relations of power which are not necessary visible and can simply be taken for granted. In these terms, the claim to neutrality actually makes the worker's position *more* political than that of a practitioner who is explicit about their political values, because it literally neutralises power, rendering it invisible and therefore non-negotiable.

In addition, and more alarming, it could be argued that failure to identity and articulate an explicitly educational purpose and role can mean that community workers may end up facilitating a process which actually 'helps people to tolerate the intolerable' rather than to challenge it (Shaw and Crowther, 1995). It is all too easy for practice to end up being 'hypocritical, claiming to be emancipatory while, in reality, doing quite the opposite.' (Ledwith and Springett, 2010). Despite this danger, there persists a 'facilitating' mentality across community work which is, ironically, often justified in terms of Freirian dialogue, an approach which is explicitly political (Kane, 2001). It is grimly ironic, for example, that the organisation tasked by government with the responsibility to 'deliver' community organising for the Big Society in England claims to do so from a Freirean perspective (Bunyan, 2012).

Freire (1972) famously argued that to claim neutrality is 'to side with the powerful' because it invariably means transmitting unexamined dominant values, 'thereby allowing existing power structures to continue unacknowledged'. This critique has been influential for some in making the case that neutrality is untenable (eg Ledwith, 2005).   It also highlights the necessity of being *reflexive*, as well as reflective, practitioners. The capacity to examine one's own attitudes, assumptions and values and, in particular, 'dominant professional constructions influencing practice' (Banks, 2007) – to see them as problematic – can provide a useful bridge between professional and political models of practice. It is also one very effective way of maintaining a

sense of professional scepticism (and modesty), bringing to the fore the agency of the practitioner. In any case, it is difficult to see how community workers can be a part of the solution for democratic life (as they hope and claim to be) unless they can see the ways in which they may themselves be a part of the problem. A different kind of rationality is, therefore, required in order to talk about community work as an active agent in the wider politics of pluralist democracy.

Community work as a political practice: participation and democracy

It is helpful to think of community work as essentially the product of two broad sets of forces and interests which reflect the changing context of political relations in society. The first is pressure from above, reflecting the changing needs of the state and broader economic and political interests, the second, pressure from below, which stems broadly from democratic aspiration (latent or manifest) (Cooke and Shaw, 1996). The practitioner is dialectically and strategically positioned between these competing demands and faced with the tensions such a position produces. In these terms, for example, participation and democracy are situated political practices which are just as likely to produce fractured and contradictory outcomes as consensus. If the potential of this strategic position is to be realised, however, it may be necessary to create some critical distance between 'community as policy' reflecting the politics of the state 'from above' and 'community as politics', reflecting the political aspirations of local people 'from below' (Shaw and Martin, 2000). Nowhere is this more apparent in the current policy context than in the renewed focus on community empowerment and engagement.

It is clear that, as the state has been 'hollowed out' by neo-liberalism, so too have the terms of engagement in local participation (Cornwall, 2008). Boundaries between public and private are becoming increasingly blurred and the extent of the central state's sphere of influence is becoming obscured by a diversity of players whose accountability is, at best, unclear. In consequence, the relationship between communities and agencies of the state has become more complex. A necessary pre-condition for promoting participative democracy in this environment, therefore, is a serious reappraisal of the community work 'subject'.

It could be argued that formulating practice through deficit categories like the 'socially excluded' or 'vulnerable groups' produces subjects for whom a place is sought within the prevailing social order. On the other hand, asset-based approaches can too easily promote a form of individualised self-help and resilience which only serves to reinforce inequality and powerlessness (Harrison, 2013). A more expansive practice would support people in developing and expressing their own identities, if necessary in opposition to those that have been thrust upon them by the existing economic and social order. It is therefore important to bring back into sharp focus what is routinely excluded from much discussion and practice of participation – those structural economic conditions and interests which create and perpetuate *injustice* and which do not subject *themselves* to democratic processes. Lister (2007:439) asserts that a key test of participatory initiatives 'is whether they … challenge traditional power relations or simply reinforce them'. This remains a constant challenge, and highlights the necessity of thinking more carefully about the relationship between purpose, context and practice.

Conclusion

The contested nature of community work has always ensured that there have been competing demands in theory, policy and practice. The mediating position community workers occupy - between the state and certain targeted 'problem constituencies' - continues to offer a distinctive opportunity to work strategically alongside local people to support them in articulating their experience, formulating oppositional strategies where necessary, and taking action as social and political agents in their own right. This means that practitioners need to frame their practice with reference to *actual* political, social, cultural and historical particularities rather than idealised notions of community participation. An acknowledgement of the politics of community work itself is a critical starting point.

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