Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners
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> **Concept invited a range of practitioners to select a chapter from the Guide, and provide an introduction explaining its particular usefulness to practice.**

CHAPTER 6: DEFINING THE PROBLEM – FRAMING THE SOLUTION

With an introduction by **Cristina Asenjo** who has worked within the field of community education for over 18 years across different countries, including Spain, Bangladesh, Ireland and Scotland. Her work has focused on youth work and conflict resolution. At the moment, Cristina is undertaking a PhD in social policy at the University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on the comparative effects of using assets and rights based approaches in community development settings. For more information on her research see

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One of the challenges of 'community engagement' is to differentiate when community initiatives respond to their own interests or the interests of powerful actors. Social theorist Stephen Lukes (2005) argues that one way people exercise power over others, is not only by having the power to make decisions, or to control the range of possible options, but also by manipulating people's identification of their 'own interests'. In my work with communities, I have usually identified the first two forms. Some institutions exercise power by deciding which project they are going to fund, or by controlling the range of projects that a community can choose from. But now that communities are increasingly encouraged to participate in decision-making and develop their own initiatives, how can we make sure that their decisions represent their own interests? Chapter 6 'defining the problem - framing the solution' helps us reflect upon this problem, and suggests seven activities to help practitioners and communities engage in the imperative exercise of critical thinking.

The chapter draws upon critical social theory to argue that conceptions of 'what is the problem' reveal a set of assumptions that are often ideologically charged. If a problem like poverty is related to individual behaviours (laziness, lack of skills, making the wrong choices), policies will promote interventions that focus on behavioural change (helping people take actions, enhance their employability skills, make better choices, etc.). If the problem is related to structural factors (inequality, poor living conditions, discrimination), policies will promote interventions that focus on systemic change (basic income, welfare provision, social rights, etc.). Engaging in an exercise of critical thinking thus involves reflecting upon how our 'own interests' might be influenced by different understandings of 'problems' and 'solutions'.

The exercise of critical thinking is central to work with communities for three main reasons. First, there is danger of stigmatizing people in situations of disadvantage. If addressing poverty is seen as a matter of individual responsibility, then people living in poverty become the objects of blame. Second, there is the danger of legitimising budget cuts. When 'solutions' are associated with self-help, it risks absolving the state of its responsibility for addressing inequality. Third, there is the danger of undermining collective responsibility to challenge social injustice. When social problems are framed as individual problems, the solutions offered are individualistic. This, in my view, clashes with the very basis of community practice: the promotion of collective actions to achieve social justice.

Hence, chapter 6 offers an extremely useful example of how critical thinking can be applied in practice. It suggests seven activities to help unmask dominant discourses and reframe problems, to include social and political dimensions. I am sure that anyone interested in exploring the extent to which 'community engagement' initiatives represent communities' interests or the interests of powerful actors will find this chapter a valuable starting point.

Introduction

Although practitioners aspire to work with communities to identify their needs, concerns and problems, the reality is that needs and problems have usually already been defined elsewhere. The question is where, by whom and with what effects?

Social problems are not fixed or inevitable. Problem definition is a process of image-making or 'framing', to do with attributing cause, blame and responsibility. Definitions reflect wider social, political and economic concerns. This means that problems are portrayed, by politicians and other powerful interests, in ways calculated to gain support for their side (see Chapter 1)

Task: Take a relevant policy document which presents a particular 'social problem' (eg poverty, employability, anti-social behaviour, lack of resilience, lack of wellbeing) and analyse how it answers the following questions:

What is the cause of the problem?

Who is considered to be at fault, to blame?

Whose responsibility is it to find a solution?

The way in which social problems are framed (defined in particular terms) determines, to a large extent, their potential solutions:

- If 'the problem' is framed in terms of personal behaviour, the solution is behavioural change;
- If it is framed in terms of the way that institutions respond to need, the solution is institutional change;
- If it is framed in terms of structural inequality (the way in which some groups always have unequal access to power and resources), the solution is wider economic and political change.

This is also important for the way in which the general public think about certain problems, for if they are not presented with alternative views, they may come to

accept the dominant one without question. In the process, those people identified as 'problems' can also come to see themselves negatively, making them even more powerless (see Chapter 9).

Framing problems and responses

Framing problems in particular ways means that some factors, which might be very relevant to why something is seen or presented as a problem, are deliberately left out of the picture. For example, if the wider context in which anti-social behaviour occurs is excluded from 'the frame', then we are unlikely to consider that when we respond to media reports. Similarly, if 'resilience' is presented as a natural and unproblematic good, then we are unlikely to question why it has become so fashionable now. By framing social problems in particular ways, governments are able to formulate the boundaries of response and at the same time to influence the ways in which people make sense of their own lives.

Discourse and common sense

Discourse is the term used to describe a set of assumptions which underpin the way social problems are discussed, and create what we come to think of as 'common sense' – beyond dispute (see Chapter 9). Those with power to shape what is regarded as common sense through such discourses also have the power to position people within them eg the 'strivers' and the 'skivers' of welfare policy. Those with least power, therefore, are often denied the opportunity to shape those discourses which affect them the most. For example, the now outmoded discourse of 'unemployment' had personal, institutional and political implications: it allowed for discussion about the level and type of personal skills required, levels of public subsidies and benefits, and the wider vagaries of the job market, whereas the current discourse of 'employability' suggests that the personal dimension is sufficient. In other words, both the problem and the solution lie with the individual, who has to make him/herself employable. This dominant discourse has filtered into educational practice in ways that direct learning towards attaining those skills deemed necessary to be 'job ready' and to seek work, irrespective of the job market, government action, or wider economic conditions.

In reality, most problems have personal, institutional and political dimensions, but if policy frameworks limit discussion to the micro (small-scale) level of personal experience this makes macro (large-scale) analysis difficult because it is put beyond consideration. Most importantly, once a discourse has been established and entered into the public consciousness, it is very difficult to shift or challenge, since people begin to accept it, often without even recognising they are doing so. A potentially significant role for educational practice then is to work with people to begin to reframe *in political terms* those issues that are currently presented as social problems: to talk and think about problems as if they are political issues and not just personal characteristics.

Task: Ask yourself and others, what you think are the common-sense assumptions about particular kinds of groups (or people like you)? What are those assumptions based on?

Task: Take an issue which is of concern or in the news. Try and represent it visually or in words and then, literally, frame it (draw a frame around it). Display the framed versions of the problem together for discussion. What dimensions of the problem are in the frame? Which ones are absent? What does this tell you about the way in which you have framed the problem?

Task: Take an influential policy document and identify commonly used words such as engagement, positive destinations, wellbeing, resilience. Consider whether these are clear and positive, or whether they could have negative meanings.

Task: Questions to raise when faced with the task of addressing social problems:
- Who is defining the problem?
- In whose interests?
- What is their explanation of the problem?
- What values inform their explanation?

- Are there alternative explanations?

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Open and closed social problems

Social problems can be open or closed. Open social problems occur when two or more interested groups are competing for the right to define the problem. Closed social problems occur when political debate no longer occurs (or is ruled out) and only one definition prevails. There is of course some flexibility between open and closed social problems. What has been closed can be opened up. An example might be the way in which disabled people have transformed public debate, and their own experience, by insisting that they are not 'tragic but brave' social problems, as previously defined. They have opened up the issue to raise questions about the disabling society.

Similarly, open social problems can be closed down. An example might be the way in which ill-health has become widely accepted as an outcome of biology (physical make-up), pathology (some abnormal response) or lifestyle choice, irrespective of the wider social conditions in which it is produced. Likewise, public debate about inequality and redistribution, particularly the state's legitimate role in providing public services, has now been stifled by the way that 'dependency on the state' has become represented as a personal failing. The task here is to engage with groups as active social and political agents who have something to say rather than simply as passive objects of policy, who just accept what they're told.

Task: Questions to consider when working with groups who are defined as 'problems':
- How contestable are accepted definitions? Are different views presented
- How can the definition be challenged?
- How can social problems be defined in ways which enable community workers to engage politically with such groups?

Public and private dimensions

There is always a dynamic between what is understood as private and what is regarded as public. For example, new 'public issues' are discovered as groups gain opportunities to collectively voice their personal experience, eg. of domestic violence or sexuality or disability. Conversely, issues such as poverty, health or housing can be turned back into 'private troubles' if people begin to see it as their responsibility to make their own private arrangements in place of what was once thought of, and funded, as a public service.

This means that there is a critical role for practitioners in ensuring that what are presented as 'private troubles' for those who are most removed from power are also kept alive as 'public issues'. This may involve enabling people to develop their analytical skills so that they can come up with a shared understanding of the causes of the problems they experience. There can also be a moment of recognition - when what people think, experience and see around them seems to contradict how such things are presented in policy (and in the media). The demonization of benefits claimants or single parents or refugees might be a case in point. This can be the beginning of politicisation (see Chapter 1). Practitioners can provide the opportunities for people to think for themselves by thinking together; giving them with the means to question negative images and supporting their self-organisation.

Seeing the bigger picture

For example, this way of understanding social problems suggests that we need to frame them in a more comprehensive way. Taking into account three factors helps us to do this. These can be represented as follows:

Context (public)

Problem (private)   Cause
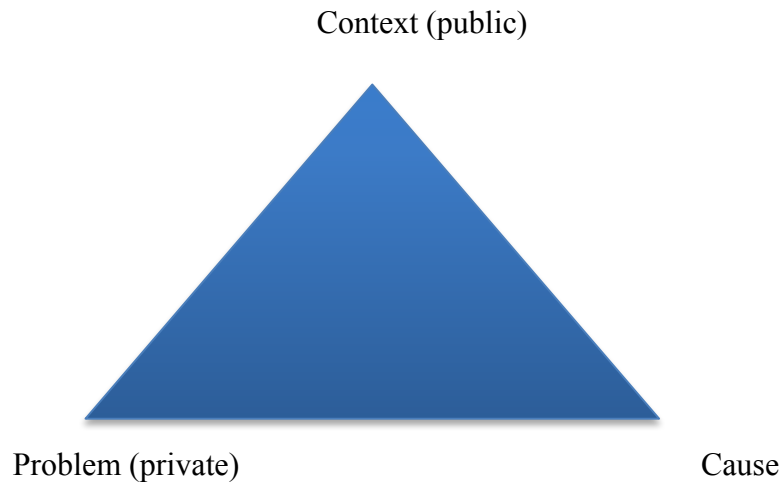
Task: *Consider the balance between these dimensions as reflected in your own experience of practice. Identify a social issue or problem and show why it is necessary to take into account all three dimensions in understanding it and acting for change.*

The complete Guide is available on the Concept website