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Building Resilience, the Role Of Community Development?

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Within the current context, the role of community development within the UK is increasingly circumscribed or directed by an array of inter-related Government policy objectives gaining currency within public debate. One such directive is the need to generate greater 'Community Resilience' (SCDC 2011:2). However what exactly is called for within this discourse is not always clear. On the one level rhetoric suggests that 'resilience' refers to the ability of communities to utilize untapped resources to organize and mobilize in the face of increasing external threats such as 'major coastal flooding, flu pandemics and attacks on the transport system' (Cabinet office 2011:7). However building resilient communities as a policy aspiration is also one which is intimately concerned with inward looking concepts of self-help, capacity building and assets based approaches to services more obviously associated with public, economic and social management. Throughout this article I will explore these ideas and discuss ways in which a focus on building resilience with individuals and groups might frame the role of community development as a practice and delimit the potential for action within it.

I will start by outlining some significant antecedents and key features that have come to broadly define community development as a profession within the UK and which position it as an intrinsically ambivalent practice. I then go on to discuss in further detail ways in which a concept of 'resilience' is presented in social policy debate and consider related concepts such as assets based approaches and social capital. Recognizing Craig's assertion that 'you cannot understand present debates about community development without reference to the past' (Craig 2011a:7) I look back to significant sea changes in the character of welfare provision in the UK, from social democratic consensus in the 1940s to the Big Society, that help put the current focus on developing resilient communities into context. I argue here that such a focus on

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'resilience' within policy is instrumental within a broader ideological shift which acts to re-moralise the public into accepting responsibility for welfare provision within the spheres of civil society, the family and on an individual level. I argue further a discourse centered on 'resilience' within communities ultimately embodies normative value judgments about how individuals and groups are deemed to cope with poverty.

What is excluded within this paradigm are the costs to working class families and individuals of having to act resiliently, the assertion of community or civil society as an inherently political and contested space and any broader structural analysis of poverty and inequality. I conclude that community development practitioners who uncritically embrace a remit predicated on building 'resilience' risk depoliticizing their work, and rather than engaging with long term progressive projects based on values of social justice for social change might inadvertently act to deliver demeaning and disciplining discourses of self-help onto 'problem constituencies' (Shaw 2008).

Community Development

The history of community development, as with youth work and adult education, is recognized as a contested field (Mayo 2008:15) where progressive radical movements for social change, philanthropic movements for humanitarianism and regressive movements based on coercion and control have wrestled and competed with one another. As a practice community work can trace its roots to the experience of expatriate development workers and their role in the struggles between oppressive ruling colonial governments and the anti-colonial independence movements of the 1960s (Craig 1989:5). As then, community development today is still fundamentally positioned within and representative of that relationship between ruling state and civil society.

Early mission statements for community development as a profession espouse the values of education for effective participative democracy. The Gulbenkian report for example proclaimed the purpose of community work as being involved with 'giving life to local democracy' (the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 1968:4) and later the Alexander report urged that to protect democratic freedom in a pluralist society

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'resources should not be put at the disposal of only those who conform but ought reasonably to be made available to all for explicit educational purposes' (McConnell ed 2002:48). These values continue to be espoused in community work codes of practice today as evident in the CLD Standards Council's assertion of 'self-determination', 'inclusion' and 'empowerment' as underpinning principals of the profession.

The Community Development Project (CDP) and broader poverty programmes of the 1960s and 70s also act as significant milestones in practice. Developmental in both establishing and legitimating community development as a recognized profession within the UK and also in crystallizing for workers dilemmas and contradictions at the core of their role. The Home Office sponsored scheme was intended to deploy community work as a solution to 'the urban crisis' (CDP 1977:3). However with a relatively large scope of autonomy to address their task community workers, sent out into Britain's deprived inner city communities, formed an alternative 'structural analysis' of poverty (Craig 1989:11) which focused on the impact of contractionary economic and industrial policy rather than, as expected, the conduct and culture of the urban working class. Finding themselves unaligned with the position of local and national authorities the contradiction for these workers in 'looking both ways' was unavoidable (Hoggett et al 2008:17). Further, the dilemma of both espousing the values of participatory democracy and empowerment while acting to deliver policy which in effect reproduced 'relations of authority' was also inescapable (Craig et al 2011b:111). Finding expression notably in CDP publications such as 'Gilding the Ghetto' (1977) and in the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group's claim to be working both 'In and Against the State' (1979) these fundamental tensions are a lasting legacy which remain pertinent in the field of practice today. The discourse of community 'resilience' not only exists within this dynamic but extends such obligation to conform beyond state actors to individual citizens themselves who are made responsible for delivering centrally agreed policy aspirations. Community development practice, therefore, like 'community' itself operates in a sphere between citizens and the state (Tett 2010:12-13) and as such is fundamentally a site of contest with the potential to be deployed towards both progressive and regressive ends.

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Resilience

On its 'UK Resilience' web pages the Cabinet Office has published a 'Strategic National Framework on Community Resilience' (Cabinet office 2011) which outlines proposals to make local communities more self-reliant in the face of crisis. A research program on the theme of 'resilience' was launched by the Leverhulme Trust in 2010 citing it as a core theme in social and physical science and matters of public policy (2010). As one of its fifteen national outcomes The Scottish Government has also committed itself to working towards building 'strong, resilient, and supportive communities' (2012). It seems evident then that 'resilience' as a concept in policy is one which holds significant sway.

As a term regularly deployed within policy it can defined on a number of levels however in general it encompasses an ability of individuals and communities to 'bounce back from adversity' (Harrison 2012:98). While facets of policy pose the incentive for building community resilience responsive to external threats, the prevailing themes are readily transmuted to domestic issues and 'resilience' models are easily located which talk more directly to the experience of social exclusion in the UK.

Disadvantaged communities can and do evolve networks and systems that help people and families build resilience and support needed to deal with the everyday challenges and risks faced by families in need.
(SCDC 2011:2)

The above quote is an example of a broader reaction against a deficit model in social policy which it is argued have over-emphasized the passivity and deficiencies of those affected by deprivation and poverty above potential resources that they may have at their disposal. As with resilience building this is essentially the foundation of an 'assets-based' approach to community development (Gilchrist and Taylor 2011:22) which seeks to conversely nurture the strengths that individuals and communities command rather than defining them in terms of need (Friedli 2012: unpaged). As the

current Government have stated, 'to reduce the barriers that prevent people from being able to help themselves' (Cabinet office 2011:3). While the warm rhetoric of empowerment is difficult to fault it is pertinent to consider the different sources of such policy material and the political contexts in which they are brought to the fore.

The elusive assets or resources that communities are deemed to possess here are described in policy in a number of often interchangeable discursive forms such as 'community capacity' and 'social capital' (SCDC 2011:2-7). Naming a kind of synergy of collective networks they are viewed by many policy makers as latent resources to be mobilized with realizable economic value in tough times. For some, models of resilience are characterized by a sense of determination and endurance epitomized by president and CEO of Adaptiv Learning Systems, an American company developing and delivering resilience training, who has suggested that 'more than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That's true on the cancer ward, its true in the Olympics and it is true in the boardroom' (Harvard Business Review 2002).

Restructuring Welfare

A central argument made in this article is that the rise in 'resilience' as a policy trend is divisive. This critique is located within the context of broader shifts in the political landscape in which the dynamic between state, market and local community has seen dramatic transformation and in which welfare has undergone a 'systematic process of institutional and ideological restructuring' (Craig et al 2011b:111).

As the Alexander report was laying down the foundations for Community Education as a professional practice, basic assumptions that poverty could and should be eradicated by centrally coordinated, redistributive services were being fundamentally undermined. In the UK, Thatcher's programme of privatization, de-regulation and trade union reform (Craig et al 2011b:112) embodied an ideological shift from post war social democratic consensus to a broadly neo-liberal value base. One of the central critiques voiced by the New Right was that paternal welfare provision had ultimately resulted in a state of 'welfare dependency' (Amin 2007:613) or a 'spiritual

and moral decline' (Friedli 2012: unpaged) in which the work ethic and incentive to provide for oneself were undermined by overinflated provision. Right wing advocates such as Murray have echoed such sentiment arguing that welfare dependency has been responsible for producing an 'underclass' in society lacking in 'income, life chances and aspiration' (cited by Lister 1996:2). This position, posed as justification for the subsequent roll back of the public sector, remains a salient feature in the current UK policy context. As David Cameron has argued,

The size, scope and role of government in Britain has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality, and increasing general well-being. Indeed there is a worrying paradox that because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism.
(cited by Hancock et al 2012:348)

While the language Cameron deploys of reducing poverty and fighting inequality is deceptively progressive, the message is consistent with a neo-liberal critique; that big state is responsible for 'Broken Britain' (Crowther and Shaw 2012:46) and that take up of welfare is driven by cultural and moral failings rather than economic and industrial conditions.

While the New Right challenged the role of the state, New Labour brought 'community' increasingly on to the political agenda. Influenced by a form of Communitarian liberalisim (Heywood 2007:137) which stressed the interplay of rights and responsibilities and presented community as a conformative and conditional space (Craig 2007), New Labour would both 'romanticise and problematise' the local (Bunyan 2012:123). Third Way politics actively deployed such notions of community in policy as a strategy to balance espoused commitment to social justice with the broad interests of business and enterprise. Further the introduction of citizens as co-producers of public services would address former complaints of unresponsive and ineffective institutions. Central to this rubric was the commitment to combat social problems at the local level with active community

members at the vanguard. However community in this context, as Mansfield has noted, invariably referred to the urban working class (cited by Crowther et al 1999:151). So those who New Labour were expecting to take on the most active roles in regeneration were those from the poorest communities. While New Labour espoused belief in active government, social democracy always remained receptive to the dominant neo-liberal position (Bunyan 2012:122). So New Labour brought 'community' on to the stage, as a euphemism for disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, but they did so without challenging the power relations or economic structures which created such disadvantage. As Amin asks;

Why expect social capital, participation and cohesion to come to the rescue when it is in such short supply, and for very good reasons, associated with loss of confidence and hope, anomie and atrophy, suspicion and distrust, social breakdown and circumspection, which accompany unemployment, lack of opportunity, negative press and institutional abandonment?
(2007:621)

The neo-liberal project, which cross cut Thatcherism and New Labour's localism has been extended within the rhetoric of the current Conservative government's Big Society initiative which has heralded 'a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities' (2013). Here community is again deployed in increasingly tough financial times. Communal spirit and the generosity of volunteers is called upon to mend broken Britain (Hancock et al 2012:352). Crucially, however, the championing of community within the Big Society rubric must be understood within the context of the fastest and deepest cuts to UK public services since the Second World War (Crowther and Shaw 2012:45). Austerity policies are impacting hardest on Britain's poorest communities and most deprived local authorities (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2012). If fully enacted as planned UK spending on public welfare will drop, as a percentage of GDP, below that of the USA (IMF cited by Yeats et al 2010:13) effectively rolling back publicly funded social welfare in this country.

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Building 'Resilient' Communities

Within Britain's Big Society, community champions, local volunteers and active citizens are celebrated as examples of model community members, people who care and want to make positive change. National award ceremonies such as Cancer Research UK's 'flame of hope award' (2016) annually celebrate their most inspiring volunteers, those who have fought Cancer, for example, and gone on to raise funds and awareness within their community. Specialist online insurer Markel UK's 'Britain's Best Volunteer' award also honours the contribution of 'truly remarkable people', 'unsung volunteering heroes' and those 'who will go the extra mile' (2016). What is significant here is the way in which such extraordinary examples of altruism and philanthropy come to form societal norms. Such cultural symbols are fed back through the media and civil society re-enforcing a model of a community which by implication condemns individuals and families deemed not to be coping in appropriate ways. In this sense 'resilience' can be characterised as a disciplining, conformative discourse in which normative value judgements are made about conduct within communities. As Harrison argues 'In celebrating the ability to bounce back judgements are made about the quality of peoples lives' (2012:103). In a US study looking at the consequences of poverty for adults and children, for example, one researcher concluded,

Many poor couples have high levels of marital quality, do not divorce and do not express their stress in violent ways. Many children living in poor households have excellent health, are successful in school, are socially well-adjusted and do not engage in deviant activities and do not reproduce their parents poverty. These individuals are resilient (Seccombe 2002:385)

In illustrating the personal qualities desirable within a model of 'resilience' the above quote conversely implies an element of blame attributed to those who would presumably fall under the category of un-resilient; single parents, those who have experienced family breakdown, victims of domestic abuse, the chronically stressed, children with poor health, low educational achievers, the 'maladjusted', 'deviant' and those who don't escape poverty; all lacking in required moral character. Ruth Levitas

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has discussed such arguments within social policy debate as typical of a 'Moral Underclass Discourse' (2005:7) in which exclusion is discussed in terms of the character traits of the excluded themselves rather than forming any broader analysis of the conditions which create such exclusion. Evocative of past distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor the implicit assumption made is that those who fail to live up to societal prescriptions only have themselves to blame.

In forming an analysis of 'resilience' as a discourse deployed in social policy it is important to consider not only what is affirmed within it but also what is excluded or missing in debate. In celebrating the resourcefulness, thrift and stoicism implied in acting 'resiliently', one perspective which is obscured is the potential social and health implications for struggling individuals and families. As Harrison argues 'in coping, people may well be undermining their own health, disposing of assets and eroding their capacity to do the same in the future- something that may well be overlooked in over-romantic celebrations of resilience' (2012:109). Examples given include the dietary impacts for children in low socio-economic families where fresh food may be substituted for cheaper alternatives, the effects of chronic stress on mental and physical health and the strain that relying on friends and family for long term childcare, where such networks exist, can place on the quality of social relationships. Such long term social and health implications, I argue, are the real untapped resources policy makers seek to realise under the banner of community capacity.

The moral prescription which I have argued is implicit within a discourse centred on building resilience within communities is one that, further, constrains the potential for community or civil society to act as an inherently political space. A radical community organising approach, as Bunyan has argued, is one which 'understands that social change and social justice are as much about struggle, tension and conflict as they are about consensus and co-operation' (2012:130). This is a view of community which echoes Gramscian conceptualisations of civil society as an inherently political arena where counter hegemonic thought can be cultivated and the common sense assumptions of the day can be held up to scrutiny and challenged (Johnston 1998:2). If community work is to be successful in its task of enhancing

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democracy in a pluralist society, as the Alexander report argued for, recognition of community as a site of conflict and contestation as well as altruism and cooperation must be part of the task. 'There is a democracy to be preserved and a right to be and become, to be respected in such areas (areas of social and economic hardship) including the right to engage freely, the right not to agree, the right not to play community' (Amin 2007:630). When communities and community members are called on to behave resiliently, false consensus is imposed which inhibits political recourse by discursively precluding issues of power and injustice at the local level.

However what is perhaps most crucially omitted in political discourse which seeks to make communities more 'resilient' is any structural or institutional analysis of poverty and inequality. The inward looking gaze of resilience means any broader societal critique is either 'missing, silenced or appropriated' (Crowther and Shaw 2012:55). Wilkinson and Picket (2010) for example, have provided robust evidence that within developed countries it is the levels of income equality which are most strongly correlated to improved social well-being rather than GDP or economic growth. Bourdieu famously taught us to recognise the fact that social capital like any other form of capital is inequitably distributed and therefore acts only to reinforce and reproduce privilege (in Gilchrist and Taylor 2011:47). Mills' lesson was for social science was to strive to understand the 'private troubles of milieu' as 'public issues of social structure' (1959:8). If as community workers we have anything still to draw from these lessons or from the fact that the poorest and most vulnerable amongst us are being asked to bear the brunt of austerity measures while inequality and child poverty escalate we must be weary of adopting a policy directive which simply helps those in need to learn to cope.

The discourses that we embrace as community education practitioners matter. They have profound effects on the ways in which define our work, the limitations of what becomes possible and the way in which the individuals and groups we engage with are constructed.

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The language of community development underpins or, more often obscures, issues of power and ideology and it is often used -or should we say misused- by those in power to promise much and deliver little to the communities we work with.
(Craig 2007)

I have argued here that a discourse of building 'resilience' is deployed in the current context as a disciplining discourse. It is divisive and indicative of a broader trend that shifts responsibility for welfare provision from the state, to being the concern of the market, the community, the family and the individual with significant and damaging costs to the most vulnerable members of our society. This is an ideological project as much as a pragmatic response to financial crisis (Clarke & Newman 2012:306). As community educators situated in an ambivalent position between the state and civil society we have a choice to make in either delivering this message or helping to generate 'counter-information' (Crowther and Shaw 2012:57) with the groups we work with in order to organise against regressive policy choices. I would argue that, rather than a discourse of building resilience, perhaps more appropriate language to adopt may be that of building solidarity or expressing legitimate anger, discontent and outrage in the face of a project which seeks to withdraw resources from the most vulnerable in society in order to redistribute them upwards. This is a policy landscape which I would argue is better met with community action than community resilience.

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