

Broadening the boundaries of psychology through community psychology

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THIS PAPER argues for community psychology to be included within the discipline boundaries of psychology. In doing this, it will enable psychology to begin to address some of the large scale social issues affecting people's well-being. It will be necessary, however, to incorporate aspects of other disciplines, make explicit the political dimensions of psychological knowledge and practice and adopt an action-oriented more student-centred approach to learning. The paper will draw on student experiences to illustrate the value of community psychology learning.

Radford (2008) raised a number of issues challenging the boundaries of the discipline of psychology and the relevance of an education in psychology as overseen by the British Psychological Society. In this paper I will further the case for a psychology that addresses real world issues and goes beyond its current boundaries. In doing this I will explore the extent to which community psychology is contained within the boundary of psychology; the challenges that an emergent community psychology might make to the parent discipline; and the benefits to students of community based learning of community psychology.

Discipline boundaries

As Radford (2008) pointed out, the current boundaries of an education in psychology in the UK do not include community psychology. The reasons for its invisibility have been explored elsewhere (Burton & Kagan, 2003; Burton, Kagan, Boyle & Harris, 2007). They are closely intertwined with the boundaries drawn by the Society over the undergraduate curriculum, reinforced by the QAA (the cur-

riculum governing body for higher education in England) benchmarking statements about psychology.

The nearest the benchmarking statement gets to community psychology is to anchor the social end of the discipline in '... intergroup relations ... social constructionism' (Section 4 a III *Examples of topic areas within core domains*).... Whilst the draft statement gave some cause for optimism that 'students should also be exposed to novel developments in the discipline, including those that at present do not command consensus' (draft statement, Section 4.a.ii *Knowledge domains*), the final statement has replaced this with the more conservative 'though students will be exposed to other areas as well' (Section 4 a II *Knowledge domains*). There is no mention in the nine pages of the benchmarking statement of community psychology theory, applications or perspectives (QAA, 2004a). Indeed, there is no mention of the organisational, societal and ideological levels of analysis as Doise (1978) suggests are essential if psychology is to be relevant to real world issues. Doise identifies four levels of explanation in social psychology. As Himmelweit and Gaskell (1992:19) say:

'he makes a convincing case that his first two levels, the interpersonal and the intergroup, are incomplete unless one relates them to the other levels largely ignored by social psychology: the social structural and institutional and the ideological.'

As I have argued elsewhere (Kagan, 2006), an insight, perhaps, into a more comfortable discipline base for community psychology in the UK is given in the benchmarking statements for Social Administration and Social Work. Here, there is an expectation that there will be study of 'approaches and methods of

intervention in a range of community based settings ... at individual, group and community levels' (Section 3.1.4 *Social work theory*). Skills to be acquired within this discipline include 'employment of understanding of human agency at the macro (societal) mezzo (organisational and community) and micro (inter- and intrapersonal) levels' and 'analyse and take account of the impact of inequality and discrimination in work with people in particular contexts and problem situations' (Section 3.2.2.3 *Subject skills and other skills: Management and problem solving: Analysis and synthesis*) and 'Act with others to increase social justice by identifying and responding to prejudice, institutional discrimination and structural inequality' (Section 3.2.4 *Subject skills and other skills: Skills of working with others*) (QAA, 2004b).

Radford (2008) reminds us that other disciplines also offer perspectives on the understanding of human behaviour, and the boundaries around community psychology knowledge and practice would extend beyond those formally drawn around psychology to embrace the knowledge and skill base of parts of social administration. The risks of failing to widen the discipline in this way include marginalising psychology from many contemporary human concerns and rendering the discipline and its practitioners invisible to policy makers at local and global levels. And yet surely psychology should be of relevance to such matters. Radford recognises this when he says:

'Most of the threats to human progress or even survival are, after all, from human behaviour itself, from global warming to AIDS, to over population, to war, to famine, to totalitarianism and various forms of extremism, and so on.'

(Radford, 2008:46)

In a more immediate sense, I reiterate some of the questions I posed in 2006: Where is psychology's visibility in the social exclusion analyses and debates; world poverty; war, conflict resolution and recuperation; the soul destroying effects of the imposition of neo-liberal economic and social policies world wide; violence towards women

and children; population movements and displacement: and so on? What can and does psychology contribute to the rhetoric of choice and involvement in public policy, especially amongst those most affected, the poor and the marginalised? What can and does psychology contribute to the vision held by regeneration professionals and policy makers of the so called mixed social economy – where middle class families will live happily alongside drug users and 'neighbours from hell' who have previously been confined to the peripheral ghettos of council estates? If the answer is that these issues are not within the boundary of psychology, the repost must be: why not when they have a fundamental impact on so many people's experience, wellbeing and quality of life?

It might be that introducing community psychology into psychology education and training will help make explicit the role of psychology in relation to these questions. However, it will also be important to recognise that to do so is to challenge and make explicit, through our curricula and learning processes, not only the moral dimensions underlying psychology but also the political ones. At the heart of the human causes and consequences of contemporary social problems are issues of power and powerlessness; of dominance and oppression; of wealth and poverty; of exploitation and resistance. Not only do we – and our students – need to understand our 'positionality' (see, e.g. Rose, 1997), we also need to become reflective and reflexive as practitioners and learners, and to be aware of our overlapping roles as citizens, experts and workers (Burton & Kagan, 2008). To do this will probably require an approach to learning and teaching that moves beyond pedagogic, didactic approaches to androgogic, critical approaches.

Student experience

At Manchester Metropolitan University we teach community psychology, through action learning, wherein students work on real change issues in collaboration with community groups and organisations (Duggan,

Hollway, Kagan, Knowles, Lawthom, 2000). Due to the strictures of the BPS curriculum required for eligibility for the Graduate basis for Registration with the Society, the course is offered as a final year optional course (although we do offer a full community psychology, unaccredited route at Masters' level).

The relationship between tutors and students is explicitly an androgogic one (Knowles, 2002, 2004): rather than vessels to be filled, students are seen as active learners, building on and reflecting upon their own experiences. As Southern and Barr (2002:3) say

'Androgogy assumes, or perhaps demands, that the learners themselves bring some experience and existing knowledge to the learning situation'

(Southern & Barr, 2002:3)

This is a particularly important stance for students of psychology, working with real world issues, as they are, themselves, actors in the process, and have relevant direct or indirect experience upon which to draw. We encourage students to identify and reflect on their existing and emerging skills, and it is clear that their learning is profound (Kagan, Lawthom, Siddiquee, Duckett, Knowles, 2007). Nearly all report being stretched, beyond their comfort zones. A mature, part time student, working with a citizen advocacy group, said:

'Partaking in this project has taken me right out of my comfort zone. I knew nothing of citizen advocacy, how it operated or what was involved. I have never communicated at this level before – with the cogs and wheels of the health authority and social services. I have learnt to plan beforehand what I want to get out of a meeting .. And now have a tool in order to understand how the whole system works – and this helps me understand why and how alliances form.'

Another full time student identified more conventional 'transferable skill' development, but with added value:

'(I) have gone through a learning curve, developing new interpersonal skills like written and verbal communication skills, mediating skills, working at different settings. Developing research and evaluation skills. I have experienced and have dealt with

complexity – like knowing when to intervene, working within the constraints of the community's pace and yet still meeting time limits.'

Another reflected on the kind of learning that could only be obtained out of the classroom:

'I have developed skills and competencies I didn't realise I had. There were times when I felt out of my depth ... but (visiting people in their own homes) made me aware of how deprived many of the areas are in Manchester, as only seeing for myself could have done. I feel I have improved my confidence and abilities.'

Community psychology does enable understanding of the contexts identified by Radford (2008) – cultural, social and personal contexts. This student highlighted the relevance to her of working at the level of systems, rather than individual change.

'CP represented a new way of looking at problems and their solutions. Firstly, that when working on a project that implements change there will usually be resistance, and that to overcome it you need to be very focused, work together and use the wide range of skills you own as a group.

'Secondly, that because people are parts of systems and structures, it is important to work with them inside of these structures, in order to create a richer picture of the problem and, in turn, the solution.'

This type of learning enables students to develop their critical awareness not only of psychology but also of the world around them. One group of students summarised their development: some students develop high levels of critical awareness.

'We believe our development as Community psychologists can best be conceptualised through Freire's notion of critical consciousness. We have developed all of what Ira Shor describes as the four qualities of critical consciousness (Shor & Freire, 1987):

- 1. Power analysis – the knowledge that society and history can be made and remade by human action and organised groups. (via participation in the course and the change project)*
- 2. Critical literacy: development of skills such as analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing and discussing (via course discussions and project work).*
- 3. Recognising and challenging myths, value systems and ultimately behaviour which operate in society (via project work and class activities).*

4. *Self-organisation and self-education – taking the initiative to transform the way in which both education and development are undertaken (moving away from the unequal distribution of power in learning.)*

Conclusion

I have argued that for a really relevant social psychology, the boundaries of the discipline could be broadened, as suggested by Radford (2008) to include community psychology. This would entail embracing some of the discipline of social administration, and confronting the political nature of contemporary social problems. However to do so,

would open the door to more community based learning and grappling with large scale issues affecting people's wellbeing as part of a psychology degree, and the development of reflective learners with a range of transferable skills and experiences. Retaining the narrow boundaries to psychology risks marginalising the discipline.

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