

5 Community work

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Community work has its own history within the development of social work in Britain. But community work has been taking place in a range of other settings too, and community workers have been applying their community work skills to professional work around community health, community education, housing and planning, community employment and youth and community work (to name some of the better known examples) both within statutory agencies, and within the voluntary and informal sectors. Given this diversity of community work settings, the definition of 'community work' takes on particular importance. What are the common strands within these different areas of practice? And how can social workers use community work methods themselves, and relate to other community workers most effectively, whether these community workers are employed within social work agencies, or within other relevant agencies, concerned with community welfare more broadly?

In a recent review of current realities and contemporary trends in community work, Butcher has argued that there are a wealth of different definitions of community work, but that 'in an effort to be comprehensive, they tend to be rather lengthy, (Butcher 1992:144). In summary, these definitions have considered community work as being concerned to enable people to develop collective responses to shared needs, whether these needs relate directly to the concerns of social service departments, such as community care or childcare needs, or whether these community needs effectively require responses from one or more different agencies, crossing departmental and sectoral boundaries. Twelvetrees has defined community work 'at its simplest, as being the process of assisting ordinary people to improve their own communities by undertaking collective action' (Twelvetrees 1991:1). And community work has been, by definition, particularly concerned with the needs of those who have been disadvantaged or oppressed, whether through poverty, or through discrimination on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, age or disability.

Even the term 'community' itself has been problematic, covering as it does a range of different meanings. Within these different usages, however, sociologists have identified two major approaches to defining 'community': community in terms of the people who live in a common geographical area (such as a social services patch), the community of locality; and community in terms of common interests (such as ethnic origin, or disability, or shared concerns about caring for a child with special needs) (Bulmer 1987:28). Both types of usages are relevant and important for community work.

Forms of community work developed in Britain over a century ago from the settlement houses, starting with Oxford House (founded in 1883) and Toynbee Hall (1885) which were established as local centres for the delivery of social work services and other neighbourhood activities, including community education. Other strands in the history of British community work include the development of the community association movement in the interwar period, and the development of tenants' associations (see Clarke 1990).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, community work in Britain has been described in terms of its diversity and its dynamic growth (Community Work Group 1973:9). As Hadley has argued, at this time 'the achievements of the post-war welfare legislation were critically reassessed' in the light of continuing economic and social deprivation, and 'new kinds of collective intervention were explored'.... 'Further, it was argued that the paternalistic style of intervention that had characterised state-run services had discouraged popular interest and involvement, and that more participative methods of managing services should be encouraged' (Hadley *et al.* 1987:2). The government itself launched a national experiment, the Community Development Project, in 1969, drawing upon experiences elsewhere, including experiences of community work in the United States. Debates on the restructuring of social work also included a growing 'community focus' (Loney 1983:22). The Seebohm Committee (Seebohm 1968:147) stressed that 'we see our proposals not simply in terms of organisation but as embodying a wider conception of social service, directed to the well-being of the whole community and not only of social casualties, and seeing the community it serves as the basis of its authority, resources and effectiveness'. The report's recommendations included support for community work within area social services teams, together with recommendations that social services should provide support for the voluntary sector, and for consumer participation more generally, within the framework of preventive approaches to community social welfare.

A decade on, in the early 1980s, it was clear that these aspects of the Seebohm Report had not been effectively implemented. But the issues were still alive and the importance of community social work was a major theme

in the Barclay Report (1982:198) which argued that ‘the personal social services must develop a close working partnership with citizens focusing more closely on the community and its strengths’, recognizing that ‘the bulk of social care in England and Wales is provided, not by the statutory or voluntary social services agencies, but by ordinary people (acting as individuals or as members of spontaneously formed groups), who may be linked into informal caring networks in their communities’ (pp. 199–200). The Barclay working party was influenced by the work of Hadley and others on neighbourhood or patch based community social work, work which Hadley and others continued to develop in the 1980s (e. g. Hadley *et al.* 1987). The development of community social work continued to be problematic in practice, however, although there were a number of local authorities which did move in this direction, just as there were local authorities and local authority organizations which made significant commitments to the promotion of community work and community development more generally, in relation to specific services such as housing, recreation and community education, as well as at corporate level (AMA 1989).

By the end of the 1980s, there was renewed interest in community work in the context of debates around the mixed economy of welfare. The type of welfare pluralism which was advocated in the Griffiths Report on community care, for instance, would entail closer collaboration between statutory and voluntary agencies, with greater emphasis upon the role of informal, community based care, self-help, mutual aid, and user involvement (Griffiths 1988). Bamford has highlighted the continuity here between the concerns of Seebohm, Barclay and Griffiths (Bamford 1990). Whilst the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 has been the key in reviving potential interest in community work, similar themes have emerged in other contemporary initiatives, including the Children Act 1989 with its recognition of the role of preventive work in the community in, for example, family centres. There have been important developments in the use of community work approaches to child care, in practice, both in family centres, and in other aspects of preventive child care, including residential care (Gibbons and Thorpe 1989; Harlesden Community Project 1979; Holman, 1983). More generally, too, the Citizen’s Charter (1991) has raised issues around citizens’ rights and the quality and appropriateness of public services, although these rights have been posed in terms of individuals, rather than in terms of communities. (User participation and user rights are central issues in community work, and are considered, in their own right, in chapter 4.)

By now it will have become only too clear that community work has taken on a range of meanings, in the widely differing contexts of the settlements of the late nineteenth century, through to government projects, local authority programmes and community based initiatives in the informal sector, in the

late twentieth century. It has been associated with policies from both right and left. Twelvetrees has categorized the different approaches to community work in terms of 'professional' community work, in contrast with 'radical' community work, the latter drawing upon neo-Marxist and feminist analyses of society. He defines the 'professional' approach in terms of professional concerns to promote self-help, and to improve the effectiveness and appropriateness of service delivery, within the wider framework of existing social relations. Alternatively, the 'radical' approach emphasizes the potential contribution of community work to shifting the framework of existing social relations, empowering the powerless to question the causes of their deprivation, and to challenge the sources of their oppression, with a focus upon anti-racist and anti-sexist work (Twelvetrees 1991). Having set out these distinctions, however, Twelvetrees has also recognized that these have been greatly oversimplified.

There is a further difficulty with Twelvetrees' use of these terms to describe the different approaches to community work. The designation of one approach as 'professional' could be taken to imply that the other 'radical' approach was in some way 'unprofessional' (although this is not an argument which is put forward by Twelvetrees himself). In fact, of course, professional values, knowledge and skills are essential for community work practice, regardless of the theoretical perspectives of particular practitioners. It might therefore be less confusing to categorize Twelvetrees' 'professional' approach as the 'technicist' approach, meaning an approach which focuses upon the application of community work techniques, regardless of wider debates about values and underlying social relations.

In contrast, the 'radical' approach focuses upon the potential relationship between community work and wider strategies to promote the empowerment of those who have been disadvantaged through the social construction of race, class and gender relations. But the term 'radical' has itself been used in different ways in recent years, being applied to fundamental challenges from the 'radical' right, as well as from the 'radical' left. As an alternative, the term 'transformational' has the advantage of implying a practice which is geared towards empowerment, development and liberation. The term has been applied in both first and third world contexts, emphasizing the importance of democratic methods as well as objectives in community development (see Hope and Timmel 1984).

In practice, of course, whatever their concept of community work, community workers have to operate within the constraints of their particular situations, both in terms of the interests of their employers, and in terms of the interests of their client communities. And studies of what community workers actually do have shown that they tend to spend their time supporting community groups working on immediate issues, with relatively modest

reformist goals (Barr 1991; Butcher 1992:152). Given the immediacy of the massive practical problems and unmet needs within the type of communities which have professional community work support, it would perhaps be more surprising if this were not the case. But it is important to recognize that community work has been and continues to be developed within the wider framework of different and competing political agendas. There are right-wing versions of community enabling, for example, geared towards the promotion of self-help, to rolling back the state, and substituting for public responsibility in service provision, just as there are radical versions of community enabling, with more focus upon democratic participation and community empowerment, for social transformation.

Whatever their varying theoretical perspectives, community workers share a range of community work methods, together with a range of knowledge and skills. The study group report *Community Work and Social Change* (Gulbenkian Foundation 1969) identified three main levels of community work:

- grass roots or neighbourhood work (working with local individuals, families and community groups);
- local agency and inter-agency work (working with local umbrella organizations, federations and other local-authority wide organizations, together with local statutory and voluntary organizations);
- regional and national community planning work (for example, working on economic development issues, planning and environmental issues which span wider than the local boundaries).

In practice, of course, as the subsequent study group report concluded, 'the interrelation between these three levels of community work is continuous' (Community Work Group 1973:12). Community work within social service departments clearly involves both neighbourhood work and local agency and inter-agency work, for example, typically with a focus upon service development, for one or more client groups (community care provisions being based upon precisely such a mix). Whilst agency and inter-agency work, and social and community planning work are central to community work, however, a number of authors have drawn attention to some of the dangers of work at these levels. In particular, social planning work can lead community workers to substitute themselves for the communities which they are committed to supporting and enabling (Twelvetrees 1991). This point relates, in turn, to the question of different community work approaches, directive and non-directive methods.

Community work methods have been defined in terms of two ends of the directive/non-directive continuum. Non-directive approaches were characterized by Batten in terms of where decision and action lie with the

members of the group themselves. The characteristics are self-determination, a process where the group identifies its own needs, makes its own plans and works largely by self-help to their realisation. The community worker is an enabler in this process, not the director or manager.

In contrast, directive methods are

where the main decisions are taken by the official or leader or council and programmes and policies are worked out on this basis. Imposition rather than self-determination is the characteristic and active participation may be limited to a small committee or inner official group.

(Batten 1967, quoted in *Current Issues*, 1973:13).

Batten himself was a strong advocate of the non-directive method on grounds of principle and practice believing that directive methods tended to be counterproductive in the long run.

Since then, the non-directive method has itself been criticized on a number of grounds, including the view that, in an unequal society, community workers who are totally non-directive, without being prepared to raise issues of inequality and oppression, end up by reinforcing the status quo (Filkin and Naish 1982:36–47). It has, in fact, become widely accepted that community workers do have a professional responsibility to challenge discrimination and oppression, even when they are committed to the non-directive method. So, for example, if a community group were to discriminate, either directly or indirectly, against black or ethnic minority residents, the community worker who works with that group would have an overriding responsibility to challenge that racism, regardless of the community work method which was being employed. Many local authorities now include equal opportunities provisions, both in terms of their own policies, and in terms of their arrangements for grant aid to the voluntary sector, including community groups.

While the non-directive method has been subject to criticisms and review since Batten developed it in the 1960s, there are features which may still be relevant and useful in the 1990s. For example, it has been argued that the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 may lead to pressures on community workers to deliver, in terms of care in the community. But ultimately, community workers may have to argue that community groups, like individuals and families, have the right to self-determination. If they choose to provide community care services, that has to be their decision, rather than the decision of the community worker who is employed to support the development of community care in the neighbourhood. But community groups cannot be directed to provide care services. This is not in any case realistic, any more than it is realistic to

assume that community workers can set up carers' groups, for instance, if not actively supported by the carers concerned. Nor could, or should, individuals or community groups be directed to substitute for cutbacks in necessary jobs and services such as domiciliary services (Twelvetrees 1991) (although there have been proposals to enforce volunteering as a condition of receiving benefits in workfare-type schemes, for example). And community workers may have to argue that as professionals committed to equal opportunities, they should never direct women to provide care in the community in ways which undermine women's rights to equal opportunities, whether in terms of opportunities for paid employment, or in terms of social relations, in the family and in the community.

Community workers need a range of knowledge and skills in order to practise effectively. Typically, community workers' tasks involve some combinations of the following:

- making contact with individuals, groups and organizations;
- developing a community profile, assessing community resources and needs;
- developing a strategic analysis, and planning aims, objectives and targets;
- facilitating the establishment of groups;
- facilitating the maintenance and effective development of groups;
- working productively with conflict, within and between groups and organizations;
- collaborating and negotiating with other agencies and professions;
- relating effectively to policy making and implementation, including local politicians;
- communicating orally and in writing, with individuals, groups and organizations;
- working with individuals, including counselling;
- managing resources, including staff time and budgets;
- supporting groups and organizations in obtaining resources, e. g. grant applications;
- monitoring and evaluating progress, and the most effective use of resources;
- withdrawing from groups, and/or facilitating the effective ending of groups;
- developing, monitoring and evaluating equal opportunities strategies.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. But community workers should be competent to carry out all of these tasks if they are to function effectively, in a variety of settings. In order to do this, community workers need to have knowledge of the relevant policy areas, including the appropriate legislation. So, for example, they need a background understanding of social policy and welfare rights, together with more specific knowledge in relation to the issues which are central to their

particular post, such as relevant housing and planning legislation for community workers in housing departments, for instance, or child care and community care legislation for community workers in social service departments. In addition, community workers need to have knowledge and understanding of the socio-economic and political backgrounds of the areas in which they are to work, including knowledge and understanding of political structures, and of relevant organizations and resources in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. And they need to have knowledge and understanding of equal opportunities policies and practice, so that they can apply these effectively in every aspect of their work.

In relation to specific practice skills, community workers need to have confidence in their skills in the following key areas:

- engagement;
- assessment, including needs assessment;
- research;
- group work;
- negotiating;
- communication;
- counselling;
- management, including time management and financial management;
- resourcing, including grant application;
- recording and report writing;
- monitoring and evaluation.

While this list may sound formidable, in practice many if not most of these skills are transferable to and from other areas of practice. In fact, many of these established areas of community work knowledge and skills are precisely the skills which social workers may most need to develop, in the changing context of social work in the 1990s (Bamford 1990). And many of these areas of knowledge and skills are also shared by unpaid community workers and activists. This follows from the starting point that ‘there is no monopoly on the term community work, nor should there be’ (Twelvetrees 1991:13). Paid community workers have responsibility for valuing and supporting the knowledge and skills of unpaid community activists, working in partnership with them. And paid community workers should be ensuring that unpaid community workers and activists have maximum access to further education and training. Current developments in training, such as the work on National Vocational Qualifications, through the Federation of Community Work Training Groups, have been geared to maximize the value given to experiential learning, and to maximize community access to further education, training and professional qualifications.

The Barton Project, Oxford, provides examples of a wide range of community work at different levels, linked into education and training provision for professional social and community workers as well as for volunteers and activists. The project was established in 1974 in a peripheral postwar housing estate which had been identified as one of the city's high-stress areas. Starting as a joint initiative by the local authority and the university, the project now works closely with both city and county councils, with local community organizations, with voluntary agencies such as Oxford MIND and the Children's Society, and with a number of social and community work training courses. The project includes community work on social work related issues such as community care, with a community care worker employed by social services working from the project. Information and advice services are provided to local residents and groups, covering welfare benefits, housing and debt problems on a neighbourhood basis as part of the project's anti-poverty strategy. Specialist welfare rights support and training is provided to social services staff, and other agencies on a county-wide basis. In this way community social work is linked into wider preventive work and community development. The project undertakes research and contributes to policy development, including community care planning. The student unit based in the project provides social and community work placements for local courses, and staff contribute to teaching on these courses as well as providing education and training for volunteers and community organizations. The Barton Project moved into purpose built accommodation, alongside a range of statutory and voluntary agencies, and close to the local family centre. These new facilities are the result of years of campaigning by residents and local groups who have been actively involved in planning the centre, a degree of local involvement which has developed over time. In fact, the project's credibility with local people and concerned professionals has been built up over the past two decades.

Although community work has been advocated as an approach to social work since at least 1968, with the Seebom Report which preceded the establishment of local authority social service departments, the record of implementation has been problematic. As has already been suggested (Hadley *et al.* 1987) progress has been uneven. Furthermore, where community workers have been employed in local authority social service departments, there have been complaints of isolation and marginalization. The study of local authority community work by Davies and Crousaz, for instance, concluded that the majority of community workers had a 'poor relationship with their social work colleagues who appeared to make little effort to learn about community work' (Davies and Crousaz 1982: xvii) and their 'peripheral situation in the organisation and their detachment from the main hierarchy

was more disadvantage than benefit to community work in most of the agencies studied' (p. xviii).

Experience so far has been that despite arguments about the logic of developing preventive, community based approaches, in practice the immediate demands of statutory work, such as child protection, take precedence in the allocation of scarce resources. In particular, in some areas, there has been increasing pressure upon the more generalist types of preventive community work (concerned with issues such as the development of anti-poverty strategies). Similarly, despite the logic of increasing support for the voluntary and informal sectors, including community work support, in the current context of community care policies in the mixed economy of welfare, the reality has been the reverse. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has estimated that over the financial year 1990/91 to 1991/92, the voluntary sector, overall, suffered cuts of £30 million in real terms (NCVO 1992).

Unrealistic expectations have also been identified as a source of problems for community work. Studies of community work in practice have explored gaps between rhetoric and reality (e. g. Barr 1991; Van Reenon 1991:210–19). More fundamentally, in terms of contemporary debates, Abrams and others have argued that there are realistic limits to the potential for developing neighbourhood based, informal community care, and that community work can and does also lead to increased demands for statutory services. Government policies attempting to reduce public provision were, they argued, 'leading to more bureaucratic control of voluntary care, the aim being the provision of officially approved services' (Abrams *et al.* 1989:74). Ultimately, such an approach to partnership between statutory and voluntary sectors and between statutory and community work more generally, risks being self-defeating.

Meanwhile, the problems associated with colonization have not been confined to community work, in relation to community care. There have been wider anxieties that the contracting process, within the mixed economy of welfare, could distort the entire development of the voluntary sector, squeezing out the smaller, more informal community organizations, and reducing the voluntary sector's advocacy role in favour of direct service provision (Gutch 1992). In parallel, there have been anxieties that community work may be increasingly focused upon community based service provision, too, at the expense of community workers' roles as change agents in promoting community participation and empowerment. Community workers face potential conflicts in being accountable to their employers while serving communities who may have divergent agendas. The government's Community Development Project (1969–78) provided examples of these types of conflict in practice. One of the reasons why government support was withdrawn from

CDP was that project workers articulated criticisms of government policies to tackle poverty and deprivation and supported community and trade union campaigns for change (Green 1992).

The contemporary context for community work is more contradictory than ever. Current policies towards enabling local authorities, with greater emphasis upon the role of the community sector, within the mixed economy of welfare, would suggest the need for a significant expansion of community work, both within statutory and voluntary agencies. And similarly, greater emphasis upon user participation would seem to indicate an enhanced role for community work, both within social services and within the wider range of welfare service provision. But meanwhile, resources are being squeezed for all but the more pressing statutory areas of work, and there is increasing centralization of decision making, a process which is effectively taking power away from democratically accountable local authorities and from local communities.

Community work can be promoted and has been promoted for widely differing reasons, ranging from strategies to facilitate the substitution of unpaid, informal care for essential public service provisions, through to strategies to combat poverty and oppression, and to promote community empowerment and social transformation. While community work can be developed in such different ways, professional community work's identity and values can perhaps provide some safeguards against abuses; the values of particular relevance here include professional respect for individuals and community groups' rights to self-determination, and professional respect for the principles and practice of equal opportunities.

By itself, community work cannot possibly substitute for wider processes of economic, social and political change, in whichever direction these changes are targeted. But community work does have the potential to contribute to such wider processes of change, and especially so in relation to the development of more preventive and more participatory approaches to social work, within the framework of alternative policies to promote more appropriate, more co-ordinated and more democratically accountable approaches to economic and social planning, to meet social needs.

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