

Community Work: Theory into Practice

OVERVIEW

This briefing is about how important theory is to policy and practice, especially when we as practitioners are concerned with issues such as poverty and working towards social justice. As a group of practitioners, we observed that community workers rarely seem to enjoy committing practice to paper, other than formal reports, and stop reading about community work theory once they have graduated. We decided to collaborate on a book for practitioners with theory about working with individuals and communities in a neoliberal context. Theory is about ideas; other people's ideas underpin what we do in community work. They are how we learn to change our practice for the better.

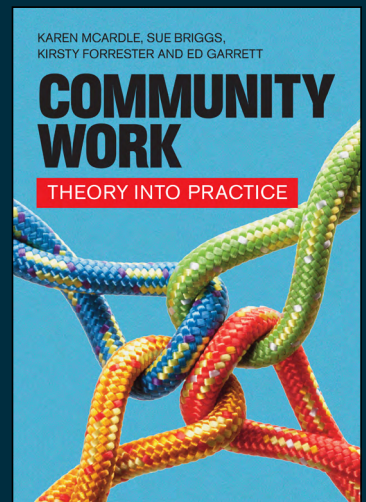
Professor Karen McArdle led a team of highly knowledgeable and skilled practitioners, Kirsty Forrester, Sue Briggs and Ed Garrett, who wrote the book. Karen has more than 30 years' experience of youth work, adult learning and community development practice, which has always been present alongside her academic career. She has conducted research and evaluation linked to a wide range of projects, most recently with Police Scotland connecting with BAME communities to enhance social justice.

CONTEXT

Prominent throughout the book is a quest for social justice and the need to challenge neoliberalism. One takeaway thought is that we all need to be political. As Freire said in the 1970s (Freire, 2018), education is in itself political, and we must allow people to set their own agenda for their learning and development. Being political is not easy and we do a disservice to our communities if we do not engage with theory and make links between theory and practice. We need community workers who are politically engaged themselves.

In a context of neoliberalism, theory is crucial to tackling systems and structures to facilitate real change. Inter alia, theory provides the following benefits to the community worker (drawn from the writing of a colleague, Elaine Lawson, about her practice):

- It provides understanding beyond what is immediately observable.
- It stimulates and expands perception of a setting, time, space and the experience of others.
- It can offer explanations of why and how things occur.
- It allows for in-depth considerations and different viewpoints to organise thinking, reach conclusions or identify a need for further enquiry.
- It challenges the status quo and allows for the refreshment or alteration of views and values about practice.
- It builds ideas on the foundations of those of others and offers a launchpad for research.
- It informs and endorses decisions.







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FINDINGS

From our experience, thinking about social justice is important but can make the community worker feel the problems are too big or too political for them to tackle. We propose the need for:

- Counter-hegemony and critical education;
- Sharpening our language and speaking truth to power;
- Amplifying and interpreting voices and stories.

Counter-hegemony sees changed thinking and changed action as part of the same process. This is important because hegemony is experienced as ‘an internalised reality, which is both understood and felt; it is not just an abstract structure’ (Beck and Purcell, 2020: 59). Hegemony makes people see things which may oppress them as normal, so counter-hegemony or change can challenge both feeling and thinking. Hegemony asserts control over knowledge and culture affirming the ideas of the dominant culture and inevitably marginalising and silencing others (Ledwith and Springett, 2022). Counter-hegemony is change that reshapes the balance of social power away from ruling elites into the hands of those who are marginalised (Beck and Purcell, 2020). Changes in class consciousness are necessary for transformative change and this change is a psychological process that Gramsci sees as cathartic (Hoare and Sperber, 2016). It comes about through several actions. The most important for the community worker, we suggest, are critical thinking and collective action.

Stimulating critical thinking and reflection allows people to see that the normal balance of power may indeed be oppressive and that things could be different. The work of Freire is significant in focusing on critical education, raising awareness of how the norm has come to be the norm, and exploring the history, narratives, discourses and underlying assumptions.

Collective action helps to overcome the sense of loneliness or isolation that can accompany feeling oppressed; it also lays the foundations for action to achieve change. Beck and Purcell (2020) argue that in our globalised society we can develop links locally, nationally and internationally. Most recently, political

literacy or helping others learn how to be heard is one way of promoting critical thinking and collective action.

Sharpening our language means telling it as we see it, and perhaps seeing things more plainly. Black Lives Matter, as a phrase, is much stronger than speaking about racial equality. It is so easy for decision makers to hide behind the bland language of inclusion and equality, without doing very much differently. We suggest it is the role of the community worker to speak truth to power and to highlight discrimination and injustice where it exists. Rather than speaking of food insecurity, for example, we can speak of hunger. This will not always be popular, and will demand courage, but it is integral to the values that underpin the profession.

Below are some questions to help you think about social justice in your own practice:

1. Consider neoliberalism and how it impacts your participants economically, socially, culturally and emotionally.
2. Identify hegemony and the assumptions that underpin disadvantage and vulnerability. How are your participants represented in the media and social media?
3. Identify the discourse or narrative that surrounds the places you work and the people you work with. How does this characterise your work?
4. Find ways of discussing 1–3 above with your participants and see what this means for them, seeking ways in which to turn the findings into positive empowerment in thinking and behaviour.
5. Consider how you and your community work profession may contribute to hegemony and find ways of sharpening language to overcome this, seeking ways to amplify the voice of participants.
6. Speaking truth to power is something that we all should do. Think about how you can do this, giving and seeking support for speaking the truth to decision makers.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Ours is a profession that asks a lot of us. Our work is about identifying needs, co-designing programmes of learning, reducing barriers and addressing power imbalances. Research by McArdle et al. (2013) showed that good professional educators are born, not made. To understand why what we do matters, as community workers we need empathy, something which arguably cannot be taught. The work we do is complex and we are frequently asked to step outside our comfort zone and engage across differences; it is demanding as we seek to engage with communities at times and in places that reduce the barriers for them; it can be heart breaking as we see the discrimination faced by the communities we serve and the trauma that they carry with them; it is sometimes risky, and we often find ourselves working against the desired outcome of our employer or funder. But the work we do is rewarding and life changing both for the communities we serve and for us as workers. We do not engage in a programme of learning with communities and leave unchanged; as community workers, sometimes we facilitate learning, but we always offer something of ourselves to build trust and, in this way, workers and communities are invested in each other.

We can work to change these systems politically. Being political does not mean, necessarily, joining political parties. It means being able to effect change in systems and structures that disadvantage people. It is no good just being a sticking plaster on the wound of poverty. We need to effect change where we can. Leaders in community work settings need to model appropriate political activity and support others to engage with this. There is a strong need for political literacy education for community workers.

Beck, D and Purcell, R. (2020) *Community Development for Social Change*. New York: Routledge.

Hoare, G & Sperber, N. (2016) *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy*. London: Bloomsbury.

Ledwith, M. & Springett, J. (2022) *Participatory Practice: Community-Based Action for Transformative Change*. Bristol: Policy Press.

McArdle, K & Mansfield, S. (2013) *Developing a discourse of the postmodern community development professional*. Discourse Vol. 334 No. 1, 107 – 117.