Working at the 'edge'

Making use of psychological resources through collaboration

IF the Thames Barrier was breached and large parts of London flooded, would we, as psychologists, have anything to offer in the way of expertise? If we experienced a nuclear accident, would we be able to contribute to recuperation and recovery? How might we use our few resources to catalyse action, to help reconstruct communities that had been torn apart?

Despite its growth and complexity as a discipline and professional practice, at the moment there are some key areas of social life and human experience in which UK psychology would have little contribution to make. In the US, community psychologists were able to intervene at the highest levels following Hurricane Katrina, as a part of the social reconstruction efforts (Acosta & Chavis, 2006; Olsen, 2006). In Venezuela, community psychologists were able to intervene at the highest levels following the mud slides in 1999 to ensure families and communities could be rebuilt with the interests of children at the core (Sánchez, 2003). These examples are of responses to ecological disasters, and it is interesting to note the centrality of ecological perspectives to community psychology.

Community psychology is best thought of as a critical, research-based practice that represents a different paradigm or world view of psychology (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). It is the study of people in context. There is a more holistic, ecological analysis of the person within multiple social systems, ranging from micro-systems (for example the family) to macro-sociopolitical structures. There is a strong belief that people and social processes cannot be understood apart from their context.

As a distinctive approach, community psychology has been slow to develop in the UK. Elsewhere I have analysed in some

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detail why this might be (Burton & Kagan, 2003), and have outlined different waves of activity that have contributed to the emergence of some contemporary community psychological research and practice (Burton *et al.*, 2007, in press). In this article I will explore some of the implications of taking an ecological

> ## 'Community psychology has been slow to develop in the UK'

perspective and what this might mean for the development of a distinctive, collaborative practice.

Implications of an ecological approach

An ecological underpinning of community psychology moves us beyond the consideration of context and its influence on people's lives, towards adopting a systems perspective on our work (Kagan *et al.*, 2006). Knowledge about how social systems operate helps us understand the multiple causes of social phenomena and social problems, at different levels, from the global to the individual. This inevitably means community psychologists are interested in the positions of different stakeholders, and in analysing and using power in all its manifestations at different points in the social system. Ecological perspectives also invite us to consider the resources available to us and how they might best be targeted on the most marginalised, conserved and remain in balance with each other. Through the articulation of stewardship as a core underlying value, respect for (and conservation of) resources available to us is highlighted (see Box 1).

In turn, this leads us to work in ways that involve other people as fully as possible, emphasising their strengths and potential, always with a focus on the context of their lives. We try to work in ways that will lead to long-lasting change and not just short-term fixes. We work as facilitators of others, and are open to learning from others. We are committed to innovation, and to the harnessing of people's creativity, whilst recognising that some existing ways of working with people are at best ineffective and at worst make things worse for them (Kagan, 2003).

Psychological resources are always scarce resources, and continually asking these questions leads us towards different, collaborative ways of working, and open to the contributions that others can make. This fits rather well with current political and professional agendas for cross-disciplinary and inter-professional work.

Cross-disciplinary working

In recent years interest has grown in transdisciplinary scientific collaboration, in terms of knowledge, learning and teaching as well as research. For example, the Higher Education Academy has a specific group to promote interdisciplinary learning and teaching. The current round of the Research Assessment Exercise has included specific reference, for the first time, to interdisciplinary research. We can distinguish here between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary forms of cross-disciplinary research (see Table 1). It is transdisciplinary work that generates new theories, models and practices, although all forms of cross disciplinary work contribute to greater richness of perspectives, opportunities for learning and development of all those involved and novel solutions to problems or issues.

The ecological thinking within community psychology gives us other ways to understand the importance of collaborative working. It not only broadens perspectives and generates new and richer solutions, it also maximises and makes best use of existing resources. I will now step outside the discipline of psychology and borrow a concept from standard ecology to help us understand what we are doing, in terms of resources maximisation, when we work collaboratively, preferably in a transdisciplinary way.

Edge effects

The forest edge or the rocky shore are both examples of ecological edges which are rich in diverse resources. These edges are transitional spaces, or 'ecotones' (Odum, 1971), where resources from different biological communities meet, often with greater variety and density of natural resources than each of the contributing communities.

Just as it is possible, through the design of sustainable systems of ecological development in the natural world, to increase the relative contribution of the 'edge' to each adjoining community, so it is possible to create a larger 'edge effect' in organisational and community development and thereby maximise its benefit to the system as a whole (Burton & Kagan, 1996).

The community psychological projects undertaken by the community psychology team at Manchester Metropolitan University involve working across disciplinary, organisation and sector boundaries: sometimes the work is across more than one of these boundaries. For example, one project we undertook recently, sought to develop capacity for evaluation in the community and voluntary sector. It involved a number of 'edges'

(Boyd *et al.*, 2006). There was collaboration between two universities (an organisational 'edge'), across the voluntary and public sectors (sector 'edges') and drew on researchers with backgrounds in nursing, management, chemistry, health and safety, soft systems work and community psychology (disciplinary 'edges').

A very much simpler project would have been one in which any one researcher worked with one voluntary sector project on evaluation. But this would have had limited impact and been narrow in scope, would have generated little additional resource other than that brought by the researcher, and had limited lasting impact. By working at the different 'edges', we were able to involve and influence the system as a whole, could release more creativity and resources overall, develop ways of working that were different from how any of us had worked before, and undertake work that was likely to last longer.

In other projects we have worked with different collaborations, such as:

- Tenants associations, housing organisations and regeneration partnerships
- University, voluntary and community sector groups, health and social welfare services
- Schools, local education authority and pupils
- UK Universities and NGO in India
- Governmental, non-governmental and community organisations
- Health services, participatory arts and mental health user groups
- Families and social welfare bureaucracies
- The criminal justice system and residents living in different localities.

BOX 1: STEWARDSHIP

The following questions spring from making explicit the value of stewardship:

- Does the work make efficient use of all available human and material resources, including those from outside psychology?
- Does the work emphasise and enhance people's strengths and capacities rather than their weaknesses and deficits?
- Does the work seek to prevent problems occurring, and build in from the outset how changes will be sustained in the long term?
- Does the worker work in collaborative and facilitative ways, sharing rather than asserting her/his own professional expertise?
- Is the work targeted on the most marginalised and approached with humility and an openness to learning from others?
- Has the work found ways of harnessing other people's creativity in innovative ways, so they may be in position to improve their situations collectively?
- Is it clear that the work will not make things worse for people?
- Has the work taken care not to damage people's living environments?
- Is the work able to respond to specific local and cultural contexts?

We have used the notion of the 'edge effect' to describe the phenomenon of enrichment in some of these alliances and confrontations (Choudhury & Kagan, 2000). When an edge is created we notice an increase in energy, excitement and commitment. Whilst working at the 'edge' might be the most sustainable way of working, not all collaborative, cross-disciplinary work across boundaries builds on an existing edge or leads to the creation of an edge, and yet they can still be valuable ways to work. We can identify three types of strategies for working across such boundaries:

Working within boundaries Here, development and change is targeted at each community separately. For example, work on the experiences of working parents of disabled children, led us to write guides specifically for employers, and to undertake development workshops with the different sectors separately (Kagan *et al.*, 1999; Lewis *et al.*, 2000). This may be energy inefficient but unlikely to lead to co-ordinated change in other parts of the system.

TABLE 1 Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary working (after Rosenfield, 1992; and Stokols, 2006)	
Multidisciplinary working	Researchers or practitioners from different fields work independently or sequentially from different disciplinary perspectives to address a particular issue
Interdisciplinary working	Researchers or practitioners from different fields bring their different practices and methodologies, and integrate their knowledge, share information and work closely together on an issue
Transdisciplinary working	Researchers or practitioners work to develop a shared conceptual framework that integrates and extends discipline-based theories and methods, through close collaboration on a topic

Working at the boundary interface
This attempts to bridge communities. For example, we undertook a feasibility study of the need for a community support project for witnesses of crime and anti-social disorder in an area of multiple disadvantage. We collected information from different stakeholders (including, for example, local workers, residents, police,

Victim Support workers) and presented the material for the different stakeholders to see. It was university researchers who undertook the work and presented the findings to each stakeholder group, enabling each to hear and learn about the others (Kagan *et al.*, 2001).

This strategy is energy intensive. There is some likelihood of co-ordinated change, but effort is on the margins of each community area of concern, so sustainability is questionable.

Maximising the 'edge' This uses natural resources – getting people from different communities to work together and use the expertise of each. For example, we worked on a project evaluating participatory arts work with people with long-term and enduring mental health difficulties. In order to work most effectively we had to work with the artists so that a common understanding of evaluation and evaluation processes was negotiated (Sixsmith & Kagan, 2005; Kagan & Kilroy, in press).

This strategy is energy efficient and

there is a high likelihood of sustainable and co-ordinated change.

These are of course 'ideal types': in reality almost any piece of work will involve some elements of each strategy. However, the comparison among these abstracted strategies is illuminative. It suggests that in working to increase the edge and working with the edge, a project will be most likely to maximise the amount and variety of resources available to it. It will also be more likely to preserve the best features of adjoining systems and to enhance the likelihood that developments will be sustainable ones. Sometimes an edge will occur naturally, and the skill is to identify it and target work there, or even work to create or increase an edge (Mollinson, 1991).

Strategies for increasing edge
There are a number of ways to work to increase an edge, largely around maximising points of contact between distinct communities and organisations.

- Location and co-location of projects, teams, events (e.g. a University research assistant looking at the impact of regeneration on local people's well-being is based in the accessible neighbourhood regeneration offices).
- Formation of inter-organisations with membership from more than one sector (e.g. an inter-generational initiative has a steering group drawing from education, local government, community, and local business organisations).
- Creation of new settings (temporary or long-standing) that bring elements together (e.g. community festivals that bring diverse sections of a community together – members of the public have fun in each others' company, while those who set up the event learn to work together).
- Conduct of activity in other locations, that is in territory associated with another sector (e.g. an advocacy project operates in a shopping centre rather than from an office base).
- Creation of multiple points of contact (tessellation) (e.g. a University department sends students to work on a variety of community projects in a particular community, and invites community members to hear students presenting their projects. Meanwhile staff members establish a mentoring programme to strengthen community leadership skills with community activists, and develop joint research projects. Community activists contribute to academic and professional conferences and identify further sites for action research).

Whilst the edge is usually enriched by the adjoining communities, with bad stewardship it can become barren and impoverished, supporting little of environmental benefit. We therefore have a responsibility to preserve the very best of all adjoining communities, which often means negotiating and facilitating compromise between competing interests of stakeholders in a project.

Summary

I have talked about some of the ways in which community psychology embraces ecological analyses and systems-level understanding. The value of stewardship leads us to questions about practice that concern the maximisation of resources, preventive work and sustainable impact. One mechanism for moving towards practice reflecting good stewardship is to work collaboratively and to identify and work at the ecological 'edges'. Different kinds of edges can be identified and maximised, which opens up possibilities for different and novel ways of working, as well as for the development of a community psychological practice.

A collaborative community psychological practice would enrich and extend existing psychological practices, expand resources and be capable, perhaps, of making a contribution to natural disaster response. A concern with stewardship and commitment to creating and working at the 'edge' might also render psychology more visible and relevant to other real world issues, like social exclusion, world poverty, conflict, war and conflict resolution and recuperation, the impact of global economic dominance, and even climate change, and encourage meaningful collaboration with others with similar interests.

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Working at the boundary means dealing with different stakeholders

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