

1 Introduction



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CRITICAL COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY IN MANCHESTER

This is a book about critical community psychology, written by a group of academic community psychologists – and one public service manager – who work in Manchester, England. Carolyn, Mark and Asiya also live in Manchester, although only Asiya was born there. Rebecca and Paul live nearby. We work at Manchester Metropolitan University, an institution that was given university status in 1992 and before that was Manchester Polytechnic – still a higher education institution but closely linked to the local authority of Manchester. We are at various points in our careers, with two of us nearing the end (Mark and Carolyn), one near the beginning (Asiya), and two being midway (Paul and Rebecca). Between us we have over 100 years of teaching and practice experience, and it is on this that we will draw throughout the book. We also draw on the experiences of our students – undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral community psychology students – and the many people with whom we have worked and struggled in solidarity for greater social justice and to create a better world. The book is the result of many years working, teaching and thinking together, and realising that we have developed a form of praxis¹ that is firmly grounded in our time and place.

One of the many questions we have asked ourselves, in relation to our praxis, is to what extent it is important that we are bound together through time and place and that the place is Manchester. When we discussed this, we thought about other developments of which we have been a part. For example, at Manchester Polytechnic we developed the first Psychology of Women course in the UK (Kagan and Lewis, 1990). Whilst place was important in bringing like-minded people together to work, discuss and create, we do not link this development to Manchester in particular, but rather to women's networks and the women's movement more widely. Our department produced the first book on qualitative research methods in psychology (Banister *et al.*, 1997), but again, although being in the same place at the same time was important for the group of authors, we do not link this development specifically to Manchester, but rather to the critical turn in social psychology following the so-called 'crisis of social psychology' in the 1970s and 1980s.

The development and evolution of our work in critical community psychology, though, we do link firmly to Manchester; a modern city with a past littered with collective struggles. Bauman (2007a) draws attention to the importance of place, an importance that underpins our experiences:

It is around places that human experience tends to be formed and gleaned, that life-sharing is attempted to be managed, that life meanings are conceived, absorbed and negotiated. And it is in places that human urges and desires are gestated and incubated, that they live in the hope of fulfilment, run the risk of frustration – and are indeed, more often than not, frustrated and strangled. (Bauman, 2007a: 81)

¹ 'Praxis' means the union of theory and practice, implying that the two cannot be separated.

Why Manchester?

Manchester is in the north-west of England. As a site for manufacturing and heavy engineering works, Manchester was at the heart of the industrial revolution and local people became catalysts for free trade in the nineteenth century. It is the place where Engels lived and wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844 and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *Mary Barton*, *Cranford* and *North and South* between 1848 and 1854. It is the home of the modern Cooperative Movement (which emerged in Rochdale, just north of Manchester, in 1844). In 1868 the first Trades Union Congress was held in Manchester's Mechanics' Institute. During the second half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries, the campaign for women's franchise was led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, who were born and lived in Manchester. Manufacturing industry was supported by the first passenger train line between Manchester and Liverpool; in 1761 the first artificially cut waterway, the Bridgewater Canal, was built to carry coal into the city to fire the furnaces. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the history of Manchester was linked to the history of collective struggles for political representation, underpinned by a growing recognition of the power held by working people. In the city centre stands a statue of Abraham Lincoln with an inscription thanking the Manchester cotton workers for supporting the anti-slavery movement of the unionists in America, even though this meant that the cotton grown in the Southern states could not reach the Lancashire cotton mills, creating extreme hardship amongst the cotton workers. In addition to its political and industrial heritage, Manchester has more recently been a centre for creativity and cultural activity, leading the UK in music, poetry and art. It has a radical past, and its local government continues to innovate on both the national and European stages. It is now common to talk of it as a city region (Ravetz, 2000), an



Figure 1.1 *New Manchester: The City Centre from the South.*



Figure 1.2 *Old Manchester: Moss Side.*

emphasis that will become ever more important as the twin challenges of ‘peak oil’ and climate change (Holmgren, 2008; New Economics Foundation, 2008a) bring profound changes to the economy and to human settlements, forcing us all to look to our local region as the main source of support for prosperity and well-being.

Despite its radical and challenging past, Manchester experiences some of the same tensions as other large cities around the world. We (the authors) share, with other urban elites, the capacity to move from the city as and when we like, due to our privileged economic, cultural, social and political positions. In many ways we have become separated from the city in which we live and work, and through cyberspace and travel the global has become local. This book, in part, attempts to re-centre ourselves – as well as our students and those of you reading the book who may also be at risk of becoming part of the urban elite – into the city where those most marginalised by our social systems live and experience the world.

Many of those with whom we work are removed from cyberspace; they are physically rooted firmly in the city. Their fights take place inside the city where they battle on a daily basis for a better place to live. Many of the problems they face are not of their making, but need to be understood in a much wider context. As Bauman (2007a: 83) says:

To cut a long story short: cities have become dumping grounds for globally conceived and gestated problems. The residents of cities and their elected representatives tend to be confronted with a task which by no stretch of imagination can they fulfil: the task of finding local solutions to globally conceived troubles and quandaries.

As the divide between the rich and poor increases at an ever more rapid pace, the flight of the elite, both physically and psychologically, from their urban dwellings



Figure 1.3 *Barriers around or against the community?*

becomes ever more stark in comparison with the anchored, grounding, both physically and emotionally, of the urban poor. Whilst the elite have their lifestyles and aspirations moulded into (and moulded by) the mass media, the poor live their lives in its shadow.

So, our text is caught between the local and the global. We cannot ignore the global issues (such as global warming, global economic inequality and pillage, global migration and so on) that are shaping our discipline, or at least calling it increasingly to account. We cannot ignore the global issues that shape our lives and those of the people with whom we work, via the spread of global capitalism and the clutch of neoliberal social and economic policies. Equally, however, we cannot escape the rootedness of the struggles of the urban poor around us. Whilst the work we are engaged in is mostly local, it speaks to issues of wider, global concerns.

LEARNING THROUGH ACTION AND ACTION THROUGH LEARNING

Our approach to practising and learning about critical community psychology is an action learning one, wherein we, and our students, learn by doing. We believe that critical community psychology is not a discipline that can be learnt and then applied, but instead we need to continually reflect upon and learn from our experiences. The very subject matter requires us to move beyond pedagogic, didactic approaches to

learning to andragogic, critical approaches (Freire, 1972a, 1972b; Knowles, 1980). In the UK the undergraduate curriculum is circumscribed by the British Psychological Society and the Higher Education Authority – essentially the same group of people drawing the boundaries around what is covered by the undergraduate curricula (Kagan, 2008). At present, the formal definitions of a psychology curriculum do not include community psychology. Radford (2008) acknowledges that other disciplines also offer an understanding of human behaviour, and within the UK academic framework many of the underpinning values and insights of community psychology would fit more easily within the curriculum areas of social work and social administration. This does not deter us, but in making the case for growing community psychology, Kagan (2008: 29) asks:

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 riposte must be: why not when they have a fundamental impact on so many people's experience, wellbeing and quality of life?

She goes on to discuss the implications of introducing a psychology that deals with some of these matters into the mainstream curriculum and suggests that to do so will be:

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' . . . , 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 . . .

It is this that leads us to our approach to learning and doing critical community psychology action and critical reflection (Kagan *et al.*, 2007a) and that is reflected throughout this book. It is worth noting that at the time of writing there is no professional route to training and employment as a community psychologist in the UK, although in 2010 a Community Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society was formed which gives some legitimacy to the discipline within the professional establishment. Burton and Kagan (2003) offer some explanations for why there has been a gap in Britain, linked to the social policy context; the ideological and theoretical character of psychology; the availability of appropriately oriented people to become community psychologists; and the presence of other community practitioners.

Action learning

At the core of action learning (Revens, 1980) is *doing something*: getting involved with and working on a real issue or concern outside of the academy – a theme that we pursue through research via action research (see below). Other features include: collaboration; facilitation of learning; reflection; discussion with and learning through peers; exploration of values, assumptions and feelings underpinning the learning experience; and critical and collaborative thinking, informed by theory (McGill and Brockbank, 2004; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007). These features of action learning are implemented in our courses, in so far as students:

- negotiate and work in collaboration with a community partner;
- work on a change agenda and issue identified by the partner;
- form action learning groups with other students for continual discussion about their work;
- follow an action research cycle – reflection at the heart and evaluation and sustainability built in from the outset;
- approach tutors and other students as resources for learning.

We, as tutors, provide theoretical frameworks for thinking and facilitating the extension of students’ learning. We use the same processes of learning ourselves and hope that the examples we give throughout the book give a flavour of what this is like in practice. Whilst you, as reader, can explore the issues we present on your own, your learning will be more powerful if you work with others on the subjects we cover, and, if possible, apply your learning to a practical task you are facing in partnership with other community partners.

Action research

In the ‘doing’ part of action learning, we encourage an action research process. Whilst there are many variations of action research, at its heart is some intentional action which is reflected upon in the light of evidence of change and modified in the light of experience. It is a process rather than a method, and in its simplest form it combines understanding, or development of theory, with action and change through a participative process, whilst remaining grounded in experience (Kagan *et al.*, 2008). Action research is not necessarily a progressive process, and more technical approaches can lead to control and constraint rather than empowerment and liberation. The key stages of an action research process are:

- *thinking* – defining and understanding the problem or issue, planning and decision making;
- *acting* or doing – implementing strategies for change;
- *reflecting* – evaluating progress and impact, and reflecting on the skills and processes of change.

It is easy to see that the thinking, doing and reflecting stages resonate with action learning. The stages are distinct but also overlap, so many of the concerns of one stage are repeated in others. A good example of this is the role that participation plays – participation is relevant to all stages of action research but raises different dilemmas and ways of thinking about it at planning, doing or evaluating stages. Whilst we have separated the stages out for the purposes of the book, the overlapping and common elements of each stage need to be borne in mind. Although we have placed action research centrally in our practice and in this book, we do not intend to write a book on methods of research. There are many volumes already devoted to this and we favour using whatever methods are most suitable for the task in hand – and if there are none, creatively inventing them! Of course we need to think carefully about the epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning different kinds of information. This means we need to consider carefully the assumptions underpinning the nature of knowledge revealed through different methods, and the assumptions about the nature of the world and people in it. However, we do not want to get involved, here, with the esoteric arguments that have made many a psychologist's career and are captured in the many textbooks on methods. If we are assiduous about thinking and planning, skilled in execution and careful in reflection, we suggest that any method can serve the purpose of community psychology (Burton and Kagan, 1998): it is the purpose and the use to which methods are put that is important.

By way of illustrating the utility of action research as an orientation for critical community psychology, we can examine what Reason and Bradbury (2001:2) suggest the purposes of action research to be:

- to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives;
- to contribute through this knowledge to increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of individuals and communities and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet;
- to combine practical outcomes with new understanding, 'since action without theory is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless'.

In addition to the cyclical pattern of the different stages within action research, its underlying features, in common with critical community psychology, include:

- being a deeply collaborative process of inquiry, operating at one and the same time at individual, interpersonal, group, organisational, community (and indeed societal) levels;
- focusing on practical (and political) issues;
- including reflection on one's own practices and the involvement of others in the research;
- involving collaboration between researcher and participants;

- being a dynamic process of spiralling back and forth among reflection, data collection and action;
- enabling the development of a plan of action to respond to a practical issue and/or create change;
- incorporating careful, planned sharing of findings with all relevant stakeholders.

It is not always necessary to be explicit about action research stages as there is an argument that can be made that all research involves action (Parker, 2005) and all action can be researched. Whilst this may be true, action research reminds us of the political dimension to our work and the need for participation and reflection.

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION

There are many texts that focus exclusively on language, discourse and social representations. We cannot do justice to these fields here. Rather, we need to explore briefly how language usage, discourses and representations of our work and of community can impact upon thinking around critical community psychology, public engagement and policy development. In the UK, in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher (the then prime minister) claimed that there was no such thing as society, only individuals and families. In an interview with *Woman's Own* magazine (31 October 1987) she said:

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.

In exploring this claim, we can see that language is not a transparent medium which conveys and communicates, rather language is hugely important. Thatcher locates gendered individuals (individual men and women) and families, indicating that there are the people who need to 'look to themselves first'. This is presented in opposition to 'casting problems on society' as 'there is no such *thing* as society'. There is little nuance in the claim, and by making society a thing, the speaker rejects its existence.

During the 1980s, too, there was a so-called ‘turn to language’ in the social sciences. This movement originated alongside increasing recognition that the transmission model of communication (Wertsch, 1990) provided an over-simplistic model of language. The transmission model of communication assumes that meaning is carried through words being shared and encoded, implying a rather static view of the meanings carried by language. However, language is more flexible than this and its uses and meanings are continually changing.

Act!

Write down what you think critical community psychology is and how it differs from other psychologies and/or other community practices. As you go through the book, periodically review your ideas about critical community psychology. Try and document how your understanding of ‘critical community psychology’ changes throughout the text as you encounter different chapters.

If language is not a static system, how is it used? Language is an important mechanism for doing things, greeting, praising, denying, doubting and claiming (see Potter, 2001). It colours everything we do and say. We can see this process very clearly impacting upon common community descriptors, such as a ‘rough estate’, a ‘sink estate’, a ‘gypsy community’, a ‘cohesive community’, or an ‘organised community’. All of these terms are laden with meaning and do not function as transparent shared understandings. Different people may interpret the terms differently. Crucially, these terms imply judgements: judgements that differ according to the speaker of the term and the context in which the terms are used, reflecting social power in many possible ways. Consider, for example, how the same term might convey different meanings in different circumstances.

Think!

What power is implied by the following statements about ‘sink estates’?

Mother-of-seven ... portrayed as the epitome of a benefit-dependent, sink estate slob (*The Independent*, 2008)

10 steps to turning around a sink estate (*BBC News Magazine* headline, 2008)

Brighter future for notorious sink estate (*Observer* headline, 2008)

Man shot dead on notorious sink estate (*This is Local London*, 2007)

Even genteel Eastbourne is plagued by sink estate (*The Sun*, 2009)

True grit on the sink estate (title of play by Dave Florez, 2005)

Blair sink estate to get £2.4bn new look (*Evening Standard*, 2010, referring to resources to be used on the estate where Tony Blair gave a speech when he was prime minister).

In our work – and in the writing of this book – we know that we must take care about how we talk about people, situations, analytic concepts and incidents. Some of the terms we have used seem unproblematic, but need some explanation. Below we illustrate some of the choices we have made in the use of language in the book.

We: any combination or all of the five authors. When used to denote our approach to critical community psychology, or to illustrate community psychological practice, ‘we’ may often give the impression of unity when in practice there are differences, and discussions and arguments take place all the time.

Community partners: the people with whom we work outside the academy or formal services on projects and struggles to improve life in their communities and strive to increase social justice.

Poverty, oppression, marginalisation: descriptors that come from a political analysis about the objective positions that people occupy and not necessarily people’s own estimations of themselves or their situations. This analysis takes as given that societies are conflictual and that there are differentials in power and experience.

Reflect!

Over the time we have been working in critical community psychology, there have been changes in the meanings of words and phrases, and changes in the words used to describe the same phenomena. How have you reacted to these changes (or indeed, if you did not know about them, what sense can you make of the changes)?

- mental handicap, the intellectually disabled; people with learning disabilities; people with learning difficulties; people with the label of a learning difficulty
- the handicapped, the disabled, people who are disabled, differently abled, disabled people
- homosexual, gay, queer
- coloured, black, African heritage, mixed race, dual heritage
- females, girls, women
- poverty, deprivation, disadvantage, social exclusion,
- tramps, vagrants, homeless, precariously housed
- migrants, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, trafficked people
- mad, insane, mentally ill, people with mental health difficulties or mental health issues, psychiatric survivors
- riots, civil disturbances, civil grievances
- bigotry, prejudice, racism

Consider how where we are positioned in the world also informs the terms and meanings.

Throughout the book we provide footnotes where we think there might be confusion over the use of specific terms. One term, though, warrants greater attention here, namely ‘critical’.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘CRITICAL’?

We use the word ‘critical’ throughout this book. It is used as an additional description for versions of a number of disciplines (including community psychology). It has multiple origins, but perhaps the most significant one is from its use in ‘critical theory’. This itself refers to several things – in some contexts it was used as code for Marxism, or rather for historical materialist analysis. It became best known in referring to the Frankfurt School of Marxist intellectuals concerned with questions of culture and its relation to society (e.g. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Habermas). Here what is meant by the term ‘critical’ is an approach that tries to understand a social reality through introduction of another, more penetrating frame of reference, one that has to do with a general theory of human society (or at least late capitalist society) understood in terms of contradictions between different social interests and economic processes of exploitation, capital accumulation, and so on. So these critical theorists apply a powerful set of practical-theoretical tools to social phenomena to try and get a more thorough understanding that can help foment progressive social change.

But this way of using ‘critical’ need not be restricted to a Marxist approach. It could also apply to any approach that seeks to redefine, rework, or give direction to a discipline through this appeal to ‘another more penetrating framework’, but this would need to be characterised by an attempt to look beyond appearances, beyond accepted explanations and rationalisations. It would almost certainly imply an analysis of the underlying social interests and the use of the idea of a wider frame of reference than the discipline in question. Examples would be feminist theory or the use of the social model of disability to question dominant professional frameworks and their understanding of women or disabled people in relation to male and patriarchal or ‘ableist’ values, respectively.

Another common use of ‘critical’, however, seems to come from the lay notion of the ‘critic’. At its worst (and most postmodern) that almost seems to mean ‘say what you like’, and ‘pose as the most critical voice of all’. There is no method, just individual opinion. This can be destructive rather than constructive. It could be seen as part of the ‘society of the spectacle’, of consumerism, of capitalism itself (Debord, 1983).

Here we’ve set up two ideal types, with a clear bias as to the one that we are more comfortable with, and why. Nevertheless the idea of being a critic is also contained within the first version of what ‘critical’ means, simply because the work of those who follow an orthodox, non-critical path is being criticised – if not explicitly, then implicitly. However, we see little value in *ad hominem* critiques that attack the writer or other bearer (e.g. through policy and practice) of an acritical approach.

Reflect!

If you want to check whether you are being critical in the best sense, ask yourself:

- Is your analysis one that requires stepping outside the dominating frame of reference of this society and its dominant social science (including psychology)?
- Where is your argument taking us and in whose interests are you making it?
- What's the action – and what's your action?
- Are you doing this in a spirit of inquiry, respect and solidarity?

Although we have discussed language here, and there is no doubt that language is important in maintaining social relationships and contributes to the construction of social worlds, we do not want to press the point and suggest that it is more important than it is. Whilst our use of language may serve to reproduce the social system, we can also use it as a tool for transformation. Language is a cultural resource we can use, alongside others, to connect with other people, to exchange world views, to clarify intentions and meaning. It can just as much be a tool for liberation as oppression (Williams, 1980).

ORIENTATION TO THE BOOK

Throughout the book we have used an action research and action learning process to organise material and to illustrate one approach to critical community psychology, namely the one we have developed in Manchester.

The book is organised into three, interrelated parts with an emphasis on theory, or thinking (Part I), strategies for action, or acting (Part II) and skills and resources brought to bear on a critical praxis, or reflecting (Part III). These are the cornerstones of our approach – as you have already seen above, within each chapter you, the reader, will be invited to think, act or reflect, and we hope these invitations will help extend your learning and critical overview of the activity that is critical community psychology. We have anchored our discussion in our experiences of working in critical community psychological ways, and the text is illustrated with examples from some of the work that we and our students have been involved with. This means that there will be lots of references to our own work in the text. We do, of course, value other people's work, but are making no claims to provide a comprehensive overview of critical community psychology. Indeed, many other examples of community psychology practice can be found in journals and textbooks, and we do not set about reproducing or reviewing them here.

We are rarely entirely satisfied with the work we do – not because we do it badly, but because in all critical community psychological work there are tensions to be overcome and dilemmas to be faced. We have tried to include some of these as we illustrate the approach. As a further aid to this, we have included, at the end of each

section, some 'critical disruptions'. We are aware that by doing this we leave ourselves open to the charge that we are not committed to a community psychological perspective. On the contrary, we believe that a continual process of questioning and offering alternative ways of thinking, via reflection on theory and action, leads to a stronger critical community psychological praxis. We would encourage you to add your own. A further critical disruption raises some questions about the whole approach taken in this book: of critical community psychology itself.