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To be Academic or not to be Academic

As a final year student at Stirling University in 2003, I embarked on a community psychology project for my research dissertation. Having been taught psychology with a positivist bias for two and a half years, I was introduced to community psychology at the end of my penultimate year. I identified strongly with the idea of looking at socially caused problems and applying a conscience to research, and so chose to apply this new way of working to my research project.

The project was an evaluation of a scheme designed to reduce school and social exclusion in a secondary school in rural Scotland. The school had decided on selection criteria, rightly or wrongly, which involved them choosing young people they felt were experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties and some form of learning difficulty. The young people selected were then invited to attend a local youth project full-time for the duration of their schooling, with opportunities from local authority services to gain more vocational experience.

During the research the questions that became most pertinent were: which kinds of criteria would be needed to consider whether the scheme worked; ways in which it worked and did not work for the various stakeholders; and what it was about the structure of mainstream schooling that meant this scheme was necessary.

For the purposes of completing my degree, the dissertation component required me to spend around 6 months researching and writing, before finally producing a ten thousand word report on the research I had carried out.

Beyond that, with community psychology in mind, I also wished to carry out a useful and meaningful piece of research, with the research centred on the young people I was working with in order to empower and give them a voice.

I found myself taking on many roles in this 6-month period. As a student of psychology I had to acquire skills that allowed me to critically evaluate the context and structure of the scheme and ultimately produce a well-written dissertation. As a researcher I was required to learn and use new methods, which would be more effective in enabling the young people to express their beliefs and experiences. All these skills allowed me to reflect on how the scheme related to a wider context of government policy and educational models.

This was all as expected before I embarked on the project and was, indeed, similar to many fellow students’ experiences. However, my assumptions, values and skills differed from those of some fellow psychology students as I wished to use community psychology in my practices. Inevitably, due to methods chosen and the nature of community psychology, this lead to my project being much more complex and time consuming than an average dissertation.

Most of my peers were not given the opportunity to take on more demanding projects. Many took on much smaller research projects which appeared to be much less time consuming. Rarely did they even need to leave the University, having a large sample of students on hand to test instead. Much of their research involved short questionnaires, computer based tests or short tasks. While the statistical analyses they applied to their findings were often technically complex and demanding, that seemed often to be the only component that really stretched the students. While others’ projects were by no means simple, I felt their skills could have been put to better use out in the local community with more demanding research and practical experience.

I found the main difference between my research and that of most others’ was praxis. Before I started my research I spent 2 months familiarizing myself with, and becoming familiar to, the young people in their every day environment at the youth project and becoming more trusted (“immersion in the field”). Rather than just ‘hanging around’ I volunteered at the youth project as a learning facilitator. On a small scale this became praxis itself, as the scheme desperately needed more staff. This help meant that I was giving something to the group who, in time, gave back to me through their help in my research. It also made action research more achievable.

On an individual level I was aiming to enable the young people to learn, both educationally and personally. While these actions were originally based on my opinion of what the young people wanted, I soon found that it was what the young people themselves identified as needing most, and was what they later reported as most useful in their time at the youth project. Regarding higher levels of change, pragmatic reasons such as time and limitations of resources made transformative, as opposed to amelioratory, intervention difficult.

Feeding back my findings to the young people and staff and opening up discussion
regarding possible approaches to action was one way I tried to accomplish this. I was able
to contribute to revisions of the structure of the scheme, and feel that, in some ways, I
supported the staff in putting more effective pressure on the school to be more positive
in their thinking and actions. Looking back, I was by no means an academic or a professional,
community psychology was very new to me in both its values and in the methods it
tends to prefer to employ and my reflection and ultimate writing of a dissertation did not
come easily. Had I been more experienced, I might have employed more sophisticated
methods and I might have created more opportunities for praxis, preferably at higher
levels for example policy change.

However, my lack of experience and knowledge did have its advantages, as did this
lower level of praxis for which I might otherwise have not had time. My status as a
‘student’ and my younger age was never seen as a threat to staff. As a learning facilitator
my relationship with the young people was much more balanced regarding power. I did
not speak in an academic manner, which might otherwise have distanced me from others.
I felt much less than an expert, which was probably communicated to others and put them
at ease. Most importantly, these factors allowed me to build trusting relationships with
the young people. While there was a form of power imbalance once I became a learning
facilitator, it was greatly reduced by my perceived low status. While I was by no means an
expert, I was nevertheless able to apply community psychological values and methods to
enable empowerment of young people in the context within which I was working. After
the research had been carried out I was also able to feedback my findings to the young
people and staff involved in the scheme. This process of consultation would normally cost
a lot of money for the scheme but again, due to my status, it cost them nothing. All of the
above was achieved and I was still able to graduate!

One year on I am still researching, now as a Ph.D. student. On reflection I found the
praxis part of my prior research the most rewarding, effective and meaningful part of
the research. I now find myself in a dilemma however, as what is expected of me as a
Ph.D. student and possibly ultimately as an academic, is in contradiction with these ideals.
To complete my Ph.D. in Psychology I am not required to enable empowerment, to consider
praxis/action research or to effect change in any way. Furthermore, while carrying
out research as a final year student there was less pressure to conform, fewer ‘eyes’ on the
work I was doing. I was not expected to publish, and my work, which would be seen by
few, could be more radical.

Now I am a Ph.D. student however, there seems to be more pressure placed upon me to
conform. The perception appears to be that I should now become more ‘academic’ in a
more orthodox sense. I feel expected to acquire a particular way of writing, thinking and
speaking. I am expected to publish articles which are only accessible to other academics
and which most others would find difficult to understand. I am expected to present at conferences,
again attended only by academics, and it is likely that my language and vocabulary
will become more complicated and inaccessible as I advance. Though it is by no
means the rule, the expectation is that I will conclude my 3 years with a long, complicated
thesis which is accessible to very few, and which, in order for it to be accepted, may
experience pressure to conform.

Currently I feel torn between this dichotomy: to remain at the level of status I am at will
make it easier to gain the trust and respect of those I wish to enable and afford greater
possibilities for praxis. However, if I wish to effect change at a higher level, I feel I need
status to earn the respect of academics and policy-makers and this seems to mean accepting
I have to work within current constraints. Yet if I do the latter I may lose the contact I
feel I currently have with community members. The level of praxis I engaged in at undergraduate
level, while modest, was still important and perhaps the minimum a researcher
should be doing. I see few successful academics spending time immersing themselves in a
field, gaining trust and respect from those they wish to research and focusing on praxis, as
opposed to furthering their career in various ways.

In conclusion, I feel that the chance for meaningful, small-scale praxis is great through
humility, immersion and action research. I feel that as psychologists we should spend a
greater portion of our time directly enabling others. This would give us more opportunities
for meaningful reflection and research and maximizes the chance that our work is
grounded in critical community psychological principles and values.

Secondly, the dilemma between becoming more academic and remaining true to my
community psychological values is a great one for me. As an undergraduate I expected
community psychology to deliver the praxis its principles theoretically demand but as a post-graduate I have found the reality somewhat different. The irony is that despite our values, Community Psychologists, just like other academics have a tendency to publish journal articles inaccessible to others, write in styles that even undergraduate psychology students let alone others find difficult to understand and often refrain from praxis.