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## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

*Theory and Practice*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents some approaches to community work that are currently in use with a focus on needs assessment, asset based community development and Homan's lens of praxiology as applied to community work. It outlines the presentation given by Dr Wendy Bowles at the Department of Human Services – Centrelink conference and includes some practice examples and outcomes from the conference session.*

Community development (CD) is one of the intervention approaches used by social work: an approach whose purpose is usually to increase social capital, address a particular social issue or further develop the community opportunities available to meet a particular identified need. Mendes notes that community development and social work 'tends to be far more integrated and cooperative in the countries of Asia and Africa, where social development has become the primary form of social-welfare intervention to address poverty and deprivation' (Midgley, 199, pp. 3-33; Vasoo, 202 pp. 34-35 cited in Mendes 2008, pp. 1). He goes on to say the community development is at times seen as separate to social work and at other times seen as a social work intervention, however as an approach it 'seems to have become somewhat marginalised within Australian social-work practice and education' (Mendes, 2008, p. 15).

Community development provides an avenue for social workers based in DHS – Centrelink to effect change at a broader level in society in ways that can positively improve conditions for groups of clients, rather than remaining focussed on the more traditional, individual approaches of work that have been the domain of social workers in recent years. This paper looks briefly at Homan's lens of praxiology, locality development, social planning and social action approaches. It then focuses on needs assessments, asset based community development and the major differences between service and development approaches to community development in the Australian context.

*T Jones-Mutton, W. Bowles and H Barton.*

Homans (2008) uses the theoretical lens of praxiology to understand and promote community change. He describes praxiology as 'a consideration of human action that has both personal and social consequences' (Homans, 2008, p. 46). The basis of praxiology is drawn from social learning theory (we learn through interaction with others and our perceptions about these interactions) and social construction theory (we attach meaning to our perceptions about objects, events, and processes when we interact) (Homans, 2008, p. 46). This lens is able to be applied to the personal, social, private and public spaces and our interactions in these contexts. The main 'theme of praxiology is that people act purposefully to satisfy their needs and to improve their future, and that change most effectively proceeds from an interactive process of reflection and action' (Homans, 2008, p. 47). People both learn about and change the world as they act on it (Homans, 2008). 'Praxiology leads us to consider what action is possible based on what people believe about themselves as individuals and as a group, what they believe about how their world operates, and what they, as individuals and as a group believe they want at this time and can do' (Homans, 2008, p. 47). People become co-creators with the community development worker because this lens promotes the idea of people believing in themselves, their own learning and their own value, rather than privileging the ideas and experience of others who may be seen as 'professionals'. The idea of equal value for ideas incorporates a principle of sharing that knowledge with others and encouraging open and critical discussion in a positive, respectful atmosphere. In this framework, community development is about people coming together in a place where they are willing and capable of taking effective action through a reflective, respectful, participatory process underpinned by principles of sharing of both power and knowledge.

Some of the critical questions raised through this approach are around how people come to believe in their dignity and how they come to trust themselves and the others who are working alongside them. Social workers in a community development role need to focus on what is good, strong and right about what the community and individuals believe; this builds a context of hope. It is important then, to promote people having a belief in themselves, their own learning and the value of their own ideas. Knowledge for the CD work needs to be locally developed, with people growing and developing through the experience of their own action and reflection. Knowledge that is gained from experience is more deeply rooted than knowledge gained elsewhere (Homans, 2008, p. 47). Homans (2008, p. 48) makes a cautionary note: that 'change agents need to resist the temptation to sneak in their own ideas while appearing to be partners'. To do so, would be to undermine the co-creation of knowledge and the process of praxiology.

The cycle of learning for action which occurs in praxiology is circular and recursive. It moves through the stages of change/mutual learning, capacity for effective action, willingness to take action, group unity and reflection/knowledge

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

in a circular motion, underpinned by trust and dignity. The development of understanding that is built in a context of hope (Homans, 2008) is a critical component of this approach. Praxis requires reflection on personal dignity and public responsibility; analysis of the current conditions; assessment of the opportunities for action; generation of theories on what will be successful and further reflection and dialogue (Homans, 2008). Facilitation, or enabling, of this process to create the conditions for change to occur, is a critical function that the CD worker undertakes.

Other models of CD work that have been used by social workers include locality development, social planning and social action models. Rothman and Tropman's locality development model is based on self help, emphasizing economic and social progress with an orientation towards power structures and partners in the power hierarchy. The social planning model is more rational and technical, focused on solving identified social problems and on using sponsors within the power structures. The social action approach aims at redistribution of power and resources, with a primary focus on social justice issues, aiming to target oppressive power structures. These approaches are focused more on change than on transformation and on deficits rather than strengths (see Laing, 2009)..

CD methods could be categorised as either a service or a development approach. The service approach tends to focus on problems, or service gaps and deficits, and in response to these, activity tends to be episodic in nature. The service approach reinforces power imbalances and has been criticised for promoting passivity. It relies on experts, views the recipients as "owning" the problem and as isolated and dependant and is about giving "gifts" or donations to meet needs. It has little expectation of contribution to others or major changes to conditions.

Development approaches focus more on assets and capacities, with a longer term, ongoing view aiming to equalise power relationships and promote capability and power in the community (Homans, 2008). These approaches look at what is available, what can we build, what can we be? They rely on partnerships, mutual ownership of possibilities, link people with shared interests, change conditions, expect a contribution and are much more participatory and 'sustainability' focused (Homans, 2008).

Community Assessment: A matter of balance.

When undertaking a community assessment Homans (2008) argues that both needs assessment or analysis and an asset based approach have their merit, but what is important to take into account, is that either done in isolation can do more harm than good.

**A needs assessment** is about collecting information about the needs of the community in order to plan for improved service delivery (Alston & Bowles 2003).

*Bowles, W., Jones-Mutton, T. and Barton, H.*

The process of identifying and analysing needs is an implicitly value-laden and non-objective task (Alston and Bowles 2003). It has the capacity to define a community by its negatives, providing some focus to negative feelings such as hopelessness, apathy and dependency. Information collected from a needs assessment can be valuable as it can provide information about the nature and characteristics of the community; can determine whether current services and initiatives are responding appropriately; identify gaps in service delivery; identify where services are necessary and the need for community development (South Australian Community Health Research Unit as cited in Alston and Bowles 2003). Needs assessments can also sometimes be utilised for political purposes, to verify needs and convince decision makers to take action.

In conducting a needs assessment there are a range of needs that can be evaluated to inform the assessment process. The different types of needs as outlined by Bradshaw (1972) are listed below:

1. Normative Need– these are needs identified usually by experts, others in authority such as the Australia Bureau of Statistics, social research or indicators, council plans and so forth
2. Felt Needs – are derived from community surveys, focus groups and are usually the wish list of the target group.
3. Expressed Needs – needs expressed in evidence such as waiting lists, numbers of clients unable to be seen and other forms of data collected by human service agencies.
4. Comparative Needs – compares one group or community to another considering national or state norms.

In proceeding with a needs assessment Homans (2008) outlines the following questions for consideration and application.

1. What is the community whose needs you will clarify
2. What are the range of needs?
3. How will you get the information?
4. How will you interpret this?
5. What resources (time and money) are available?
6. Who owns the information that has been collected?
7. How will the information be used?

Remember that a needs assessment is not an end in itself it is merely a means of gathering data to assist with decision making (Alston and Bowles 2003). Used on its own it can become a vehicle for focussing on the deficits in the community, and impact negatively on service delivery whereby a need is over or under estimated.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

**Asset -Based Community Development Approach** (often referred to as ABCD practice) shifts away from a needs-focused approach and instead focuses on the gifts, skills and assets within a community (Green & Haines, 2002 as cited in Healy, 2005). According to Kretzman and McKnight (1993, p. 13 as cited in Healy 2005)

“Strong communities are basically places, where the capacities of local residents are identified, valued and used.”

Underpinning this alternative approach are the four key principles outlined by Healy (2005)

- Change must begin from inside the community
- Change must build on the capacities and assets that already exist within the communities
- Change is relationship driven
- Change is orientated towards sustainable community growth.

It is important with this approach not to deny the realities of the problems on hand, especially socio economic disadvantage. It can be naïve in relation to the barriers, particularly structural obstacles that many service users experience in realizing small goals let alone their hopes and dreams (Healy 2005).

In making communities more sustainable it is important not to rely on only one source for funding or resources particularly government funding because this could limit the directions the community wants to take especially as national agendas may not be consistent with local ones. Furthermore it is important to consider the range of potential investors in a community and to be creative. By developing economic capacity you are also building economic strength overall. Real partnerships with investors, who want a return on their investment is one way to develop this.

Relationships are also important in the ABCD approach as they are based on mutual learning and exchange not on donar type relationships. They also get people talking together from different social groups who don't usually communicate. So a significant role of this approach is about strengthening relationships in the community. One way of achieving this is by identifying the common focus for each group. This fosters a sense of purpose and can reduce barriers avoiding the “us vs them” position. Such an approach also supports Homan's view about the notion of shared power and knowledge (2008). Traditionally organisations such as institutions, businesses, governments and people have been seen to be groups at odds with each other – but an ABCD approaches encourages linkages and commonalities between groups to be identified and amplified – thus bringing the different sectors of the community together.

The initial stages of an ABCD intervention include the compilation of a Community Asset Audit. The purpose of this audit, in addition to identifying assets, is to engage community members and to plan actions or goals. Healy (2005) outlines four steps to this process:

1. Engage the community – this can be done in a variety of ways. Informally it can include picnics, dinners while informally it can include public forums and meetings. Again it is important to always focus on what is positive and strong in the community. This can be a challenging aspect to engagement as communities can become problem saturated and their may be resistance to exploring strengths.
2. Construct the inventory – this includes Inductive methods such as focus groups and animation workshops. Inventories need to consider human, social, financial, physical and environmental capital. It is also important to include networks as they are also valuable assets for the community to draw on (Ennis & West, 2010).
3. Gather data – do not underestimate the process of data collection as data collection in itself can build capacity. It is also necessary through this stage to highlight strengths to participants. If people are operating from a problem saturated perspective they may need to have an idea reframed in order to illustrate the strengths in the community. The community worker needs to be constantly exploring and developing opportunities. For example cultural diversity may be a source of tension for the community, but reframed it is possible to invite the community to consider how this diversity is fact a positive resource. This then can be built on to develop positive change.
4. Recognise strengths in order to plan action. According to Healy (2005) this phase of action planning is more about realising hopes and dreams. It is less about immediate solutions to current problems and this really reflects that problems that have evolved over long periods of time are not going to be solved overnight. So action plans need to focus on laying down the foundations for change. There is often a creative and theatrical element to it. The focus can be on a range of capital especially financial capital and so examples of this include; community cafes, laundries, catering, cleaning services and integrating social with economic capital building. At this point it is also important to balance internal and external views. Internal views are linked to narrative and strength based concepts ie peoples gifts resorce and assets while external view consider structural and social justice issues.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

In illustrating these two models the value in providing an integrated approach to community assessment is highlighted. These two approaches complement each other and minimise the negative aspects of each other. Used together they reflect the principles and praxiology outlined by Homan. Specifically, the conscious steps suggested by the models create knowledge and solutions that value individuals, knowledge and experience. Furthermore they facilitate reflection and the possibility of creating dignity and respect in a context of hope.

### **CASE STUDY:**

Windale is an old Housing Commission Estate with a population of two and a half thousand people located in the NSW city of Newcastle. In the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it was described as the most severely disadvantaged postcode in south east New South Wales. The suburb had a significantly high incidence of child abuse and neglect. However by adopting an asset based community development approach the community was able to go from being the worst to being in the top 25% of the state in just five years (ABC Radio National, 2006). Initially intervention became available through the funding available through the government for a three year period. However upon conclusion of this funding work continued and the momentum was kept going by focusing on the community's strengths rather than weaknesses. The community themselves consciously rejected the idea, often promulgated by the most powerful institutions in society such as mass media and funders, that the most important thing about this devastated communities was their devastation. Instead they decided to take their assets seriously, and to put them into motion around trying to make something hopeful happen. The local lord mayor, Greg Heys described the community as; 'being a very unique, rich suburb with ordinary people living heroic lives' (ABC Radio National, 2006).

While the community still has a long way to go, in order to deal with unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence the infrastructure that has now been established, (through programs such as Men's Sheds and Children's Centre) provides a platform for the work to continue (ABC Radio National, 2006).

**Appendix One: Notes from group discussions about how community development approaches can be developed in DHS-Centrelink**

**Examples of good community development projects involving DHS-Centrelink social workers**

- Place-based servicing
- Working with emerging refugee communities in Bathurst and Orange in partnership with local agencies and community groups
- Home advice program
- Wagga Alternative education options for young people's research project
- Families Week Spectacular: local staff involved, agencies invited – recognition of what community can do, organised and distributed care packs, have means to try to engage providers and DHS-Centrelink staff, important to have food and give aways.
- Project in Warrawong: 2 years ago, community was identified at risk (for example youth unemployment rate 45%). Held community forum, one goal was a full time social worker located at an access centre; in fact there is now social worker 2 days per week located there. Also the library and medical service had been removed, but these have been returned.
- Sudanese community: social workers partnered with other services such as financial counselors, mental health workers, psychologists to map needs, address financial literacy issues and system issues such as how to get car registration, provide life skills workshops, and a refugee 'Love Bites' program
- Working with services providers: improve skills, offer education
- Cooma Young Carers group: social workers had the capacity and flexibility to engage with that community. Worked to bring together and mobilize that community in addressing the issues and needs of young carers (this project has now concluded).
- Nowra CCEO projects – social workers had the ability to work in the community, be flexible, not stuck to the desk doing delegated reports (this project has now concluded).
- Rural team examples: Condobolin Expo, working with Interagency, also local initiatives working with floods and drought.
- Community connect
- Anti-poverty committee event
- Southern Highlands legal network
- Facilitated a wellbeing for women group – led to other community issues being identified, for example providing breakfast once per month
- Carer groups – carers of people with depression
- Salvation Army dental program
- Establishing Homeless Interagency



## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

### **Strengths that support DHS-Centrelink social workers in community development roles**

- Capacity to be flexible in the way we work, having freedom to get out into the community, form networks, assess strengths in partnership with community
- Knowledge of our organization and being able to have influence within it
- Ability to be responsible
- Use of professional theoretical frameworks, training opportunities, social work knowledge base, looking beyond procedural issues, interventions that apply in the context of people's lives
- Have holistic goals – employment, training, family issues, reducing drug and alcohol usage, helping with accommodation, health issues, mental health
- Good knowledge of customer base, wealth of data to draw on
- Wider framework than a lot of community organizations / broad networks
- Ability to reach marginalized, vulnerable people, working alongside them so that they own the process, taking an empowerment approach with local issues, at local level, in partnership with local groups and people (eg Murrin Bridge / Lake Cargellico: partnering with ISO working with indigenous groups, Y/P etc): social workers know local networks (use evidence-base), community contacts, local knowledge, local CSCs, being part of community discussions, focus on process not just the outcome, also conduct education with partners, community service centres, working closely with customer service officers (CCEO)
- Political clout
- Assessment skills – Social work has a mandate to look at things differently

### **Ways to promote community development by social workers in DHS-Centrelink**

- More involvement in the kinds of activities that allow DHS-Centrelink social work to be seen, and to be creative in the community such as Youth week, families week etc – know of special events, weeks that happen throughout the year
- Work for better teamwork, include all SWOs such as TAS/PSTs, not just managers
- Be involved in community development / professional education programs for DHS-Centrelink staff
- Undertake community work while understanding DHS-Centrelink changers and goals and not neglect the individual
- We are part of the community and hence can link the bureaucracy to the community (also CCEOs, managers)
- Need to do both BAU and community work internal and external to DHS-Centrelink for example:

*Bowles, W., Jones-Mutton, T. and Barton, H.*

- Initiate more dialogue with CSC staff about how to work with vulnerable customers, also with change, also engage more with their knowledge about community and clients - they have detailed knowledge about needs as they see people each week
- Need to empower other staff to understand and practice community development (eg send out all DHS-Centrelink staff to be homeless for 24 hours, continue training and transfer ongoing training throughout the network)
- Opportunity to empower young people and other vulnerable groups in the community, break down the barriers for them to work with government, build resilience and sustainable approaches, identify where people are not engaged with DHS-Centrelink
- Social workers need capacity to have ongoing commitment to community development roles, and an approach of promoting community consultation and ownership of projects in which DHS-Centrelink social workers are involved
- Need to define our role within the organization to ensure it includes community development, bigger than fixing problems, can also reframe, encourage creative solutions; looking at local needs, co-opting corporate support (for example the CEO sleep out – involved corporate citizens as people, not just taking their money), learner driver program – coordinated a driver program for youth on Ls
- Address perceptions of DHS-Centrelink in community, overcome stereotypes
- Educating community about community strengths, for example what is working well, conducting community audit, building on the existing networks
- Actively build up collaboration, community partnerships with agencies and customers, especially where people have ‘contact’ issues, eg PST, HI, Indigenous communities, utilize the Hub meetings to be more proactive, plan rather than report
- Start small
- Set meaningful, achievable goals
- Utilise existing networks – eg community hubs
- Improve support structure around social workers doing this work
- Create portholes for DHS-Centrelink to engage with community, intentionally explore portals, be able to identify them, understand them

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

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