

Social Change and the Community Psychologist

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ABSTRACT People engage and participate in social change more than ever before these days. Both a power elite and community psychologists have roles that incorporate changing social structures in communities and groups. Community psychologists can operate as effective social change agents, but they must be aware, skilled, and able to endure the possible charges of "social engineering" made by those threatened by change. A case situation of violence reduction is used to present some ideas about social change.

Social change takes place continuously, with or without consciously aware individuals leading or promoting such change. Indeed, more often than not in the past, social change takes place in the presence of diffuse leadership or from "bottoms-up" innovation, or without planned intent. Social change then often created leaders as much as or more than that which occurred when leaders made things happen. In fact even today random change may occur far more often than we think. But added in to our present time, an elite with immense wealth and technological power are creating massive global social changes through such instruments as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations, various governments, trans-national corporations, and other agencies as well as their control over technological innovations.

Psychologists too may be intent on creating social change, that is, to take on the responsibility of consciously engaging in social engineering, and/or to play the role of social change agent. This venture requires an astute awareness of self, local and global situations, and social and political processes, all of which must be added together to enhance and maintain such work. Conscious awareness and a genuine attachment through empathy with any group of

people involved, and simultaneous detachment in the role of observer and scientist, are valuable assets in playing the social change agent role well. Intent, as Carlos Castaneda (1968, 1973, 1974, 1990) would point out, is essential to create and lead social change efforts.

Consciously seeking to create change is not a blind or random process, as a rule. And, any psychologist or even those members of the elites who become social engineers and speak about the issues or attempt to carry out change must be able to weather the enormous storms that will certainly be mounted by those threatened by change. On the other hand, rewards may accrue to those who engage in and assist in needed social change, and given the state of today's world, the opportunities are many.

The reasons for concerns about threat are tied up with power. Change takes place within social systems, whether on a micro level as with families, work groups, peers, and neighbourhoods or on a macro level as with communities, corporations, nation-states, or entire cultures. Given historical and cross-cultural comparisons, every social system has structures, dynamics, and strengths and needs. Problems within almost any given social system may become evident from the viewpoint of outsiders from other eras or places. Another and perhaps more important view is that felt from inside, which may amount to discomfort among the population, or be measured by the presence of chronic anger, attempts at revolution, suicide rates, levels of stress, alcoholism and drug dependence, or rates of departure. But it is those who have power within a given system who are particularly central to creating, stalling, controlling, blocking or otherwise influencing change.

In addition to the degree of power, the inner

versus other dimension is important for an understanding of social change. The perspective of the "natives" (in anthropological terms - the emic) may well be similar to the perspectives of the outsider (the etic). On the other hand, these perspectives may differ. Both views are valuable and yet, quite often, diverge. The externally based social change agent must be able to accept, understand, and take on the view of those internal in a system, without losing an outsider perspective. An emic observer or agent must be able to detach from an internal base, sufficiently so as to gain objectivity and understand alternative views. Gaining a balanced attachment and detachment is helpful, for such dual perspectives are not always simple, particularly given the indoctrinating effects of most systems of education and media control.

Together though, the two positions and the two views, that of power and powerless, and that of insider and outsider, can help define strengths, needs, wants, problems, and in the more optimistic words of the 1990's, the challenges present to create needed social change in a given group or community. Problem definition (Gregory, 1997) can lead to the gathering of a rich base of information that in turn, can be followed by an analysis to hypothesize or understand or "grok" the scene. Full understanding may be hard enough to obtain in a static situation but will likely be enormously more difficult in a dynamic situation.

By attempting to create change, one is far more likely to learn about processes and targets of change than by observation alone. Actions and interventions then, may be rewarded with deeper understanding.

Whether information and understanding is detailed or general, that is only one essential step in the complex process (Rich and Zaltman, 1978; Zaltman, 1983). Too often, analysis of existing information is limited, if not ignored. An astute social change agent will analyze all information available to attain an understanding prior to embarking on implementing changes. Subsequently, the astute agent will continue to analyze all information that arises.

Good analysis leads to planning for specific action. Potential interventions can be chosen as from a cookbook, or formulated and designed

for a given situation. Brainstorming techniques, literature review, discussions, pilot efforts, and successive replications or reiterations may help to assure that the intervention chosen accurately matches the problem and situation. If and when specific interventions are selected, all people involved need to know about, agree with and carry out actions required, for all will feel effects. Further, once begun, successful change may be parlayed, to build toward larger goals and continued change. Initiatives that lead to unsuccessful change should be halted, unless revisions and course corrections can help. Reviews should follow such situations to assure that all parties learn what went wrong. Ultimately, any intervention or attempt to create change leads to results, both intended and unintended. Results always carry implications and consequences.

AN EXAMPLE

As an example, a problem might be said to be an increase in crime in a country such as New Zealand or a community within the country. Many New Zealanders claim that their country is known throughout the world both as "green and clean" and "a good place to raise children." This view extends to illusions about violence, for most perceive their country as more peaceful than overseas locations, and more peaceful than existing data indicate. Gathering information quickly reveals many interesting statistics are available. Specific data is always useful in focusing on an issue. For example, homicides numbered 127 in 1993 and 149 in 1994, whereas violent crimes were 22,103 in 1993 and 41,830 in 1994 (The Dominion Newspaper, 27 August 1994, p. 3). Analysis of such information might lead the social change agent to speculate on the causes, the relationship of these numbers to the total population or the potential relationships to unemployment, poverty, education, and other factors known to be influential from past research or a review of the literature.

Interestingly, even a brief review of the New Zealand literature provides additional and valuable information. Adams (1977) for example, claimed that early New Zealand was a very violent place. "Minor violence, brawls, and assaults were a fact of life on the New Zealand frontier

as on others, but the despatches of James Busby, British Resident from 1833-9, do not contain many reports of murder or major violence. Crimes against property, from petty pilfering to robbery, were much more common and contributed to a general insecurity of business interests" (p. 20). Simpson (1984) added that "We think of New Zealand as a new country but the fact is that by 1890 New Zealand was one of the oldest of modern societies in economic inequity and sin, and in some things the oldest . . . the concentration of land, capital and other machinery by the few, which has taken half a dozen centuries in Europe, needed only a decade or two under the southern sun of New Zealand" (p. 35). More recently, Holcroft (1990) looked at records from 1900 onwards. He noted that "More than forty years ago, examining official records, I found that an average of three murders a year had been committed in the preceding decade . . . In 1988 the police in New Zealand investigated sixty-three murders . . . the growth of homicide, and of other serious crimes has been out of all proportion to the rise in population" (p. 38). Recent newspaper accounts in 1998 have noted that at least a quarter of New Zealand school children report bullying in their schools. Thus the factual information available through books, official records, newspapers and statistical studies offers a valuable starting point from which to build a case study.

Prior to 1950, then, murders amounted to three per year, whereas by 1988, there were 63 and by 1993 there were 127 and by 1994, 149. The almost astronomical rise in murders becomes clear from an analysis of statistics readily available. In going beyond to literature on violence in other countries, many more ideas can be quickly gained. In the United Kingdom, for example, smacking children has been an acceptable form of discipline for many years (McClure and Choonara, 1992). We can also learn that children who have been physically punished are far more likely to be violent later in life (Gelles and Edfeldt, 1986; Qasem, Mustafa, Kazem and Shah, 1998).

People involved, such as members of a community involved with such violence, need to examine closely the local and specific knowledge related to the particular scene reported. A

community psychologist might work with discussion or focus groups, in a consultative or catalytic fashion, with those affected. On a speculative or hypothetical level, an argument could be made, for example, that the traditional use of physical punishment in primary and secondary schools leads to a higher rate of crime in later life. Local and detailed specific knowledge of the schools and their culture, as well as the crime scene would give reasonable assurance that relationships between the overall level of crime and discipline in school are clear and are understood by the members of the community.

At some point, the members of a community, with or without the catalyst of a social change agent or a community psychologist, may decide to act. Doing something about a problem, that is, actually intervening, might well involve brainstorming, gathering together of focus groups involved with the criminal, educational, or related sectors of society, or review literature to see what has been tried or done in the past. Redl and Wineman (1957) in the education sector, for example, described a wide range of measures that could be used by teachers and principals to more effectively manage classroom or playground behaviour by children, i.e. alternatives to physical punishment. They listed a broad range of techniques, such as: (1) planned ignoring, (2) signal interference, (3) proximity and touch control, (4) involvement in interest relationships, (5) hypodermic affection, (6) tension decontamination through humour, (7) hurdle help, (8) interpretation as interference, (9) regrouping, (10) restructuring, (11) direct appeal, (12) limit space and tools, and (13) antiseptic bouncing.

Some or all of these measures could be implemented in schools in a New Zealand community as an alternative to physical punishment, such as spanking, slapping, or other harsh disciplinary measures. At the least, information about these measures could be publicized, or given to teachers, to teacher trainees, or to parents. Practice in performing these alternative activities or roles could be carried out at teacher training institutions, in parent-teacher meetings, in teacher training seminars and workshops, and so on.

If a community-wide intervention such as promotion of alternatives to physical punishment

took place, then one could surmise that the rates of crime in that community might decrease, eventually, other things being relatively equal. On the other hand, some sceptics might claim that such an intervention might make the rates of violence increase rather than decrease. Thus an experimental design and research project could determine the truth and veracity of such an argument. Of course, in practice, other things are rarely if ever equal, and consequently the actual fabrication of experiments and carefully designed research studies suffers. New research methodologies that recognize a community as far more complex than a laboratory, are essential to deal with social change and community psychology practices.

Methods and Principles of Social Change

Be that as it may, the methods and styles, the strategies and tactics, of intervention are another of the many hearts of social change. The doyen of such interventions is undoubtedly Saul Alinsky (1971, 1989) and his books, *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals* remain as classics. Alinsky argues that power stems from money and/or people, and can be augmented by bluff and deception. He feels that the social change agent should assure that the life experiences of the people involved serve as a core or base from which to work, and one should use that core to combat "the enemy." When possible, he would argue, one should approach the enemy and push them away from their own core. He would also advocate that one can force an enemy to live up to its own rules. For example, most corporations have lofty and noble goal statements in their Charters, yet they rarely live up to such goals in practice.

Among Alinsky's principles and rules are the following:

- Ridicule is man's most potent weapon
- A good tactic is one that your people enjoy
- A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag
- Keep the pressure on
- Threats are more terrifying than events themselves
- By pushing a negative, you break through to a positive
- A successful attack leads to a constructive

alternative

Pick targets carefully, fix, personalize, and polarize them.

Another series of useful principles was formulated by the community psychologist, Rappaport (1977: 210-211), including:

- Perseverance
- Discontinuity and independence
- Make use of outside intervention
- Action-oriented intervention
- Foot in the door principle
- Be not constrained by the power structure
- Participation and group action.

In terms of interventions, one learns the art and technique of intervening by actively intervening. Few roles are better situated than those associated with the community psychologist. Jerome Bruner was said to say (1962, as cited on page 225 in Reich, Robert B. 1991): "I have never seen anybody improve on the art and technique of inquiry by any means other than engaging in inquiry." Active engagement is an essential in bringing about social change! Many other social change agents have learned from and followed Alinsky's teachings, finding his ideas useful and helpful in the design, strategy, and tactical manoeuvres of creating social change (Rappaport, 1977).

A Macro Level

Violence may occur because of the stripping of power from the many by a few. The gap between rich and poor has been accelerating, the differences in technological power of the Chief Executive Officer of a major corporation, or the President of a country, and the "average" person in the street is measurable in symbolic light years of difference. Media magnates ensure that these huge and growing differences are papered over, confused, or hidden, so that the "average" person cannot even gain information about the disparities. Those with enormous powers are inclined to use their power to force their interests, while those without power may be coerced to go along with the wishes of those who are politically, financially, and socially dominant. Only rarely are they inclined or able to resist, to block, or to stand up for their rights. The scale of the current struggle to consolidate global power is beyond the imagination of most, and

the complicity of the mass media means that accurate and timely information is simply unavailable to the vast majority. On a longer and larger global scale, social change is taking place rapidly.

Violence often accompanies such change, provoked or even encouraged by one or both parties. A community psychologist who wishes to engage with such situations needs to engage, observe, describe, and gather statistical and other information. Witnessing in the form of the Quaker activity is not sufficient however. Direct involvement and personal participation in social change is essential. However, even reporting on this struggle between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, may be sufficient to draw the wrath of the powers that be. The elites are quick to decry "social engineering" as dangerous, even while they themselves cause and create social engineering that provides rewards to them. Re-labelling, word play, and the mass media can make the life and work of any social change agent tenuous at best.

Community psychologists must choose their stance carefully, play and use intervention strategies well and positively, and tread carefully. Among strategic resources recommended are such treasures as *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu (1981), the *Asian Mind Game* by Chu (1991) and of course, the books by Saul Alinsky. The general literature on social change, strategic planning, and warfare is useful as well. Lateral thinking, innovative ideas, and shortcuts to action are possible. In the case of violence and violence promoting influences, television and other mass media have been noted as having a major effect. The astute community psychologist may point this out, then encourage parents to eliminate or reduce television watching by vulnerable children. However, this reduces corporate profits for children do not watch advertisements, and goods and products fail to sell. Thus the inherent conflicts that may emerge in violence reduction, or indeed any social change, are revealed.

Larger Frameworks

Classifying social change agents is a useful exercise to note the potential range of activities and roles, the various styles, and the possible

alternative approaches. A variety of frameworks have been used to categorize change agents. For example, Doyle, Wilcox and Reppucci (1983) identified four types: artisan, technician, scientist, and artist. They claim that artisan simply replicates changes that emerged elsewhere, the technician replicates on a conscious planned basis, the scientist plans innovation and hypothesis testing, and the artist creates social innovation by influencing spontaneous systemic processes. Thus the technician and artisan replicate whereas the scientist and artist innovate. The technician and scientist use conscious planning while the artisan and artist are more concerned with spontaneous emergence of change.

A more sophisticated framework is the mindscape scheme of Maruyama (1983). A mindscape is a pattern of reasoning, thinking, decision making, planning and designing that is used by an individual, a group, or even a culture. Mindscapes vary considerably. Those that use Aristotelean logic and Newtonian physics play zero sum games without causal loops. Maruyama classifies these as H - that is, they are homogeneous, hierarchical, and classificational in their thinking. These are the straightforward, simplistic, and single shot efforts to bring about a particular change.

Other mindscapes would see individuals as different and unrelated, acting at random, without causal loops of information being present, and note that they achieve negative sums. Maruyama calls them, I - for heterogeneous, isolationistic, and random. Still another type sees heterogeneity as basic and desirable and use causal loops and seek positive sum combinations. These, Maruyama classifies as S - heterogeneous, interactive, and homeostatic. Finally, those with mindscapes similar to S but in addition are also oriented to change are classed as G - heterogeneous, interactive, and morphogenetic. These more complex approaches, added to general systems theories, may offer ideas for the social change agent to contemplate and try.

CONCLUSION

The purposes of community psychologists in engaging in social change are multiple. Fundamentally, the role of community psychologists

is to alter social structures and dynamics to accommodate more of the needs and interests of all the people within a community. Psychologists traditionally sought to help individuals cope with existing political, social and financial arrangements and realities, with their practices of assessment, therapy, and research (Fryer, 1998).

Now, perhaps more than ever before, new opportunities to engage in social change or to make the system fit the needs of the individuals, are emerging. However, psychologists must learn new skills, such as participation and engagement with the people involved rather than acting solely as "experts." They must use ecological frameworks, systems thinking, and micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Community psychologists have an opportunity to engage in lateral thinking, for example, one stimulus to violent behavior has been claimed to be the effects of thousands of hours of watching violence on television. Why not just turn off the television set, and enable parents to reduce "watching hours" by their children? Community psychologists must balance science with art in their attempts to influence structures and processes. Serving as the "spark" or catalyst, taking the lead, or simply participating may be suitable, but psychologists will undoubtedly be swept along as unwilling participants as well as agents of social change in the future.

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