



Department of Psychology
& Speech Pathology

Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group

IOD Occasional Papers: Number 2/01

**Critical Community Psychological Praxis
for the 21st Century**

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An earlier version of this paper was given at the symposium for International Approaches in Community Psychology, Centenary Conference of the British Psychological Society, Glasgow, March 2001.

Published by: IOD Research Group

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IOD Occasional Papers

Published occasionally by the IOD Research Group

For information contact the publishers at the address below

ISSN 1359-9089

ISBN 1-900139-16-2

Printed by the Manchester Metropolitan University

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Critical Community Psychology Praxis for the 21st Century

Introduction

When invited to sum up the nature of community psychology, a group of our students described it as ‘a practice for liberation with responsibilities’ (Duggan et al., 2000). This is an interesting phrase, suggestive of important underlying values, social analyses and community psychological practices. We are going to suggest that the 21st Century opens the possibility for community psychology to contribute to a radical, responsible and responsive practice for liberation. To date, community – psychology has not lived up to its liberatory promise.

Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) note that community psychology literature (interesting that it is the literature, not the practice!)

“... has paid very little attention to issues such as social action, advocacy and social change movements, poverty and anti-poverty organisations, grass roots community organising, human rights, sustainable community economic development and social policy ... (and) ... much greater attention is paid to research methodology than to our work’s political dimensions and dynamics”
Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) p.178

It is the work’s political dimensions and dynamics we want to highlight.

Liberatory practice cannot be achieved by community psychology alone, and a crucial feature of our analysis will be that for liberation, alliances within and outside the discipline must be formed. Only then is there likely to be any chance of a challenge to the prevailing ideological hegemony (Burton and Kagan, 1996), or indeed for the realisation of the process of empowerment, embedded in principle within community psychology (Rappaport, 1981). Only then, too, will community psychology itself reflect features of, and contribute to, wider social movements and be able to claim some kind of a progressive impact (see, for example, Foweraker, 1995; Byrne, 1997; Stephen, 1997).

We will be suggesting a move towards a radical praxis (Freire 1972 a,b; Lather, 1986) wherein action, research¹ and theory are inseparable and intertwined in complex ways, and immersed in the lives of people who are marginalised, oppressed and dispossessed. We will reiterate the need for a reflexive and historical practice that learns from its past and that challenges not only the social status quo, but also the status quo within psychology. Martín Baró, The pre-eminent liberation psychologist of the last century, summed the task up thus:

“... a psychology of liberation requires a prior liberation of psychology, and that liberation can only come from a praxis committed to the sufferings and hopes of the people ...” Martín Baró, p.32

We will suggest a useful model for looking at radical community psychological praxis is what we call a model of ‘pre-figurative praxis’. Elsewhere we have used the model as a way of conceptualising praxis as action research (Burton, 1983; Kagan and

¹ We do not generally find the distinction between action and research a useful one. However, we are moving towards the view that whilst not all action is research, all research could and should be action.

Burton, 2000). Broadening the definition to refer to praxis more generally, prefigurative praxis

“... emphasises the relationship between action research [... and practice...] and the creation of alternatives to the existing social order. This combined process of social reform and [... reflection...] enables learning about both the freedom of movement to create progressive social forms and about the constraints the present order imposes. It also creates disseminated ‘images of possibility’ for a different way of ordering social life.” Kagan and Burton, 2000 p. 73

What we are suggesting is a framework for self-aware social change, with an emphasis on value based, participatory work: one that is pragmatic and reflexive, whilst not wedded to any particular orthodoxy of method.

In developing the model, we will outline key aspects of the social context at the turn of the Century; elements of a radical community psychological praxis; strategies for intervention; and some of the tensions of working within and against the discipline of psychology.

Context: Social issues and trends

As we turn the Century, new challenges come into focus which frame not only our practice but also the lived experiences of those we work with. Some of the old, deep societal schisms remain, between for example, rich and poor, North and South, men and women, minorities and majorities, included and excluded and so on. However, there are additional social trends, which will have new bearings on the type of work we do.

Neo-liberalism has tightened its grip (see for example, Shutt, 1998; Galeano, 1998; Gowan, 1999; International People’s Tribunal, 1994; New Internationalist, 1997; Marcos, 1997; Pilger, 1998). From a neo-liberalist perspective, the world is treated as one large and many smaller markets. Everything is costed and commodified, including time, commitment and human relations themselves (Kagan et al., 2000b). In the First World, in Britain certainly, the primary leisure activity (for those with the resources) is shopping. Electronic communications offer possibilities for new forms of association as well as highlighting talk between people as a commodity, which can be bought, stored and retrieved.

The promotion of participative democracy and the strengthening of civil (or civic society with all its responsibilities and in all its different manifestations, can be seen as a contrast to the threat of both neo-liberalism, and the authoritarian state (Montero, 1998).

A new harshness toward minorities has developed in Britain and elsewhere, reflecting a rupture from the liberal consensus of the late 20th Century. Displaced people (refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants), offenders, child offenders, people with mental health difficulties that challenge current understanding are no longer being treated as exceptions and people with dignity, but rather as group entities to be processed and dealt with as such, and forced to live with each other away from the rest of us. (See Fals Borda (1998) for discussion of this and other turn-of-the Century

challenges to an emancipatory project.) Furthermore, the social injustices, indignities and abuses that follow such repression are, themselves, individualised, kept private and hidden from view (Kidder and Fine, 1986)

The public promotion of civil and human rights, advocacy, social action and inclusive forms of association can be seen as a contrast to the threat of repression.

Along with these trends goes the commodification and privatisation of public and community space. Elderly people in North Manchester, for example, remember the Queen's Park 'Parliament', where every Sunday a multitude of people would gather to make and to hear social and political speeches. No more: political understanding for the majority come from the television, radio or newspaper 'sound-bite'. This is linked to what Habermas (1987, 1989) has identified as the erosion of the public sphere, (or colonisation of the lifeworld) leading to a degeneration of public debate. Political debate has moved into the media and the technological sphere, giving rise to a blunting of creativity and understanding, and greater invisibility of the ideological forces constraining our lives.

Simultaneously, collective social safeguards, such as trades unionism or the regulation of the market by the state, have been successively eroded under the neoliberal onslaught.

Emancipatory education, new forms of association and participation in civic life can be seen as a contrast to this threat of deregulation and privatisation.

The last great challenge we want to outline is the ecological, environmental, planetary challenge. In the First World we have no excuse for not knowing about the threats to a sustainable environment and some of the things that contribute to this (see for example, Monbiot 2000; Shiva, 2000). We also have no excuse for not taking action at different levels to resist the destruction. However, not everyone has access to information with which they can take responsible decisions. The development of meaningful, informed participation in civil life is a major challenge and calls have been made for a move towards deliberative democracy (Fong and Wright, 1999; Koh and Slye, 1999) as one way of exercising local power in the face of large-scale powerlessness.

Emancipatory education, social action, deliberative democracy, new forms of association and participation all offer contrasts to the threat of environmental destruction.

The social trends, challenges and possibilities for resistance (and radical community psychological praxis) in the context of local actions and wider struggles are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Social Trends, Challenges and Possibilities for Radical Community Psychological Praxis

Social Trend	Challenge	Possibilities for resistance	Local Action	Wider Struggle
Inequality	Widening societal schisms	Focus energies with those with least power	Dialogical relationships with marginalised people	Struggles for social justice and equity
Neo-liberalism	Commodification of people, communication and human relations	Promotion of participation in civil society; networking	Group conscientization	Resistance to global capital; solidarity with social movements in North and South contexts
Repression	Increased harshness toward minorities	The promotion of civil and human rights; advocacy; association	Form alliances and create new social settings	Struggle and lobby against repressive laws; solidarity action
Deregulation and privatisation	Privatisation of public and community space and withdrawal from politics	Education and association	Conscientization and de-ideologisation; development counter system	Anti-privatisation struggles
Environmental destruction	Domination of global capital and threats to sustainability	Decision making	Information, education and both individual and collective action	Ecological lobbying; direct actions; development of alternatives

In our work, we as community psychologists must side with resistance to these destructive social forces. However, we must use opportunities when and as they arise, working both in and against the system at different levels. But what might a radical Community Psychology that was up to the challenges posed above, look like in terms of its tasks and its tools? We will begin to sketch these out, reiterating past calls and re-emphasising some. Certainly, we can begin to establish some criteria for adequacy when we try to see the extent to which our work furthers the themes of resistance outlined above.

Radical Praxis of Community Psychology

There is perhaps a surprising amount of agreement amongst radical practitioners about the components of a radical praxis (for example, Leonard, 1995; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Prilleltensky and Nelson, 1997; Freire, 1972 b; Martín Baró, 1986; McLaren and Lankshear, 1994; Montero, 1995, 1998; Ohir, et al., 1982; Lather, 1986; Heather, 1976). There are, however, some preliminaries to get over, namely the nature of the Just Society we are working towards and underlying values for the next century.

A Just Society and the process of social justice

In our model of community psychological praxis, we think it is important to have a vision: a vision, that is, of the kind of society we are working towards, but that we

know we will never achieve, for as we get near it, it seems, like a rainbow, to move out of reach – not because it has actually receded, but because our understanding of it has become more detailed, less abstract. Our vision must similarly keep pace (Pearpoint et al., 1993; Ringland, 1998; Schwartz (D), 1992; Schwartz (P) 1991). We, and the people we work with have to have a vision- even a dream- of what might be, to guide our actions and frame our reflections. This vision unleashes our creativity, hopes and desires and builds on our fundamental values. However, insofar as it will ever only be a guide to action, we think it is more a process of increasing social justice whilst at the same time decreasing social injustice.

What are the values underpinning a Just Society and on which our praxis is based?

Values are a way of stating, measuring or assessing the worth of something – in this case our community psychological intentions, actions and reflections, whether these are connected to teaching, social action and/or researching. In our discussion of values we are drawing on Habermas' (1979) domains of knowledge interests, as well as the distinctions drawn by Tyne (e.g. 2000), between the core values of 'justice', 'stewardship' and 'community' (as an abstract not a concrete noun).

Justice as a value leads to the articulation of the following rights:

- right to have more equal and equitable distribution of resources
- right to live in peace and in freedom from constraints
- right to equality and fair treatment
- right to self-determination

Each of these rights can be pursued in our praxis, underpinned by the value of justice.

Stewardship as a value leads to the articulation of the following duties and responsibilities:

- duty to look after our world and the people in it
- duty to enable people to make a contribution and gain a sense of belonging
duty not to waste things, people's lives or time
- duty to think long term make things last longer than us and to do things as right as we can

Each of these duties can be reflected in our praxis, underpinned by the value of stewardship.

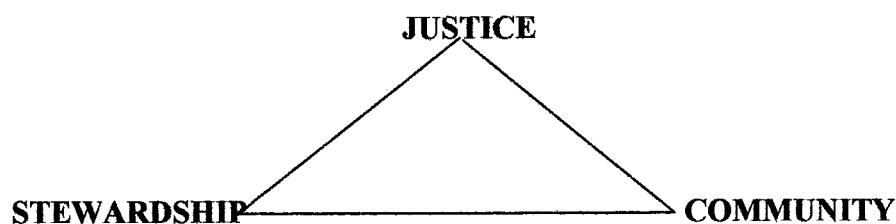
Community as a value leads to the articulation of the following hopes and desires:

- hope for companionship, love, acceptance and tolerance;
- hope to be included and for diversity to be welcomed and celebrated;
- hope that our individual and collective flaws will not hide our potential and that we will be accepted for who we are;

Each of these hopes can guide our praxis, underpinned by the value of community.

Thus we can see that a Just Society is one that is underpinned by shared values of justice, stewardship and community, and that these same values should underpin our community psychological practice (see Figure 1).

Figure1: Interconnected values underpinning radical community psychological praxis



Conceptual Basis of Community Psychological Praxis

A clear vision of greater social justice, and explicitly stated values, could lead us to develop an academic critique of psychology and go no further. However, Lather (1986) for example, argues that a radical praxis must **push** for the possibilities of an explicitly value-based social science with emancipatory goals, rather than settle for arguments **against** the possibilities of an objective science. She makes the case for radical praxis to form an ‘epistemological break’ (Hesse, 1980), meaning a rupture in the established way of conceptualising an issue. It could be argued that this is what Community Psychology has always tried to do – but it is worth re-stating the case.

Ecological Metaphor

In community psychological practice the major epistemological break with other forms of psychology is, perhaps, in efforts to look outside the individual for explanations of social experience and sometimes for solutions, whilst at the same time viewing people as agentic, purposeful beings who have the potential to influence and change their situations. Taking an ecological perspective, wherein the ‘person-in-context’ (where context is seen as being multi-level) is the unit of analysis and change, has become a guiding principle of community psychology. Pursuance of the ecological metaphor enables us to develop new progressive insights (e.g. edge effects (Burton and Kagan, 2000; see Levine and Perkins, 1997 for expansion of the metaphor) but can also lead us into the dangerous and conservative territory of evolutionary psychology, wherein ‘survival of the fittest’ and the maintenance of ‘homeostatic equilibrium’ become both social goals and social explanators. These are concepts that are not underpinned by explicit values (other than those of the mythical and ever-elusive positivist science) and are not employed explicitly in the service of moving towards a Just Society.

Whole Systems Perspectives

Following the ecological metaphor, community psychologists are widely agreed that systems analyses are required, both as a catalyst to understanding but also as a guide to action. Systems interventions are implied by an ecological perspective on change. Systems are not to be seen as static, concrete entities, but rather as social environments that can be both oppressive and supportive and that change over time. Any particular part of a social system can be, at the same time, oppressive and

supportive. For example, families, health and welfare agencies, hospitals, neighbourhood regeneration policies and institutions, schools, all provide support to enable people to maintain identity, secure material resources and at times resist the consequences of oppression.

However, as Leonard (1975, p. 56) reminds us, they also

“carry to greater or lesser degree the marks of economic exploitation and the cultural hegemony of the ruling class”

The bureaucratic and dehumanising effects of health and welfare processes, the socialisation of children for the demands of the labour market, the apathy following the failures in influence local decision making, for example, are all features of oppression.

Community psychology, so long as it recognises the contradictions inherent in systems perspectives has the potential for enhancing the supportive features of some (elements) of the systems in the interests of the people. (See Ulrich, 1994, Midgley, 2000, for critical reconstructions of the system idea.)

The Necessity to be Interdisciplinary

Systems analyses allow us to work with different parts of the system, or with the interconnections between different parts of the system (see for example Seidman's (1988) convincing arguments for a focus on meso-level parts of a system, which by definition require a focus on the interconnection between other parts of the system), or with the system as a whole. Whilst much of the community psychological literature celebrates the advantages of systems perspectives, in practice, Seidman, argues, most community psychology interventions have remained at individual or collection of individuals levels (albeit, as he says, under the rubric of prevention).

A further epistemological break is required if community psychologists are to incorporate whole systems analyses and interventions into their work. To move towards a whole systems praxis will require forays into the environmental, management, operational research and social development fields (e.g. Bell, 1992; Flood and Jackson, 1991; Franscscato, 1992; Fukuoka, 1985; Midgley, 2000; Nelson and Wright 1995; Ritchie et al., 1994; Slocum et al., 1995; Taket and Whyte, 2000; Weisbord and Janoff, 1995; Wilby, 1996). Interdisciplinary perspectives and ways of working are required.

As we disseminate the value of systems perspectives, it is worth reminding ourselves that many systems approaches are founded on conservative consensus-oriented ideologies, with an emphasis placed on the interdependence of parts of the system and energy directed to maintaining the status quo (see for example, approaches stemming from Parsons (1951); Pincus and Minahan 1973). Whole systems thinking permeates evolutionary psychology and we must be on guard, again, not to succumb to this type of value-void systems thinking. The discipline of Psychology offers little in the way of understanding systems praxis, and this deficit highlights the need for community psychology praxis to become truly interdisciplinary. (It is not only the systems work that requires interdisciplinary understanding: most community psychological praxis is

enhanced by blurring the boundary between psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology, history, cultural studies and so on (see the case made in Himmelweit and Gaskell, 1992).

A radical (Marxist) approach to systems (for example, Leonard, 1975; Burton and Kagan, 1996) acknowledges the interconnectedness of social systems. However, instead of seeing all elements within and between systems, as mutually interactive, we use

“ a multi-level analysis ... to identify the most important power relations and to decide where to intervene” (Burton and Kagan, 1996 p. 206)

Thus a radical community psychology praxis would seek interdisciplinary understanding about how oppression is caused and maintained, and use this understanding as a guide to appropriate action.

Dialectic of people and system

It is the dialectical relationship between people and systems, that Seidman (1985, p.8) suggests offers community psychology its niche.

“reciprocal relationships and interdependencies between individuals and social systems that represent a unique and emergent synthesis of community and psychology.”

Leonard (1975), drawing on Freire reminds us that this dialectical relationship is constructed by the creativity of people. Freire (1972a) puts it thus (cf: Bhaskar 1989, p.36)

“It is as transforming and creative beings that men, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods – tangible objects- but also social institutions, ideas and concepts. Through their continuing praxis, men simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings”

Freire (1972a, p.73)

Thus, community psychological praxis may provide opportunities for enhancing the creative, determining potential of people.

People's Consciousness

Knowing about the ways in which people make sense of their social worlds – social settings and social situations – is necessary if we are to work with people for change. This requires a certain degree of humility and can only be achieved by spending time with people and listening to their stories about their past, current circumstances and hopes for the future. It is only by hearing about people lived experience, in the context of their past and future aspirations, that we will be able to begin to understand their consciousness, intentions, and behaviours. More than this, though, we need to understand our own position in relation to those we are working with.

Community psychological praxis must be immersed in the lived experiences of people who are marginalised, oppressed and dispossessed. Without this,

Academic knowledge is partial. It can only be indirect knowledge, informative and explanatory. It lacks that firm footing in raw reality that turns knowledge into a mobilising force capable of leading to action ... Moral and political responsibility as well as scientific rigour, demand that the academic world turn its attention to people living in poverty, not in the first instance to teach, but to engage in a dialogue and to learn from it ... (Wresinski, 1980 (in ATD Fourth World, 1999, p.3)

It is not only to understand people and their connections with their social contexts, that we need to become 'experience near' (Geertz, 1983). It is also to underpin our praxis, in terms of how problems are defined, solutions sought and methods implemented. Community psychological praxis supports a further 'epistemological break' with other forms of psychological practice, by advocating participatory approaches, in which the psychologist's 'expert knowledge' is combined with the people's 'popular knowledge' in every aspect of their work. This is a view shared by feminists (for example, Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Reinharz, 1992;) and disability researchers (for example, Moore et al. 1998).

Community psychology must work as near to the people as possible, and in participation with them, in order to challenge the status quo and achieve social change.

These elements of a radical community psychological praxis are summarised in Table 2.

Strategies for radical community psychological praxis

Given the elements outlined above, it may now be possible to clarify the aims of a radical community psychological praxis. These aims, in turn can frame intervention strategies.

As we have argued, the overall aim is to move towards a Just Society, one that is characterised by shared concern for justice, stewardship and community. This would be a society that was more gentle and equitable; had greater functional democracy; in which people were empowered and quality of life improved; and in which violence was reduced (Veno and Thomas, 1992). To achieve this, structural change is required, not just fine tuning which will only serve to maintain the status quo (Seidman, 1988).

Four major strategies of intervention (each of which could incorporate different methods) suggest themselves: (1) furtherance of critical consciousness; (2) creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings); (3) development of alliances and counter systems; and (4) giving away psychology. These strategies are summarised in Table 3.

Table 2: Elements of a radical community psychological praxis

Element	Implication for community psychological praxis
A Just Society and its Underpinning Values?	A Just Society is one that is underpinned by shared values of justice, stewardship and community, and these same values should underpin our community psychological practice
Ecological Metaphor	Community psychology looks outside the individual for explanations of social experience and sometimes for solutions, whilst at the same time viewing people as agentic, purposeful beings
Whole Systems Perspectives	Community psychology, so long as it recognises the contradictions inherent in systems perspectives has the potential for enhancing the supportive features of some (elements) of the systems in the interests of the people and for identifying the causes of oppression.
Interdisciplinary	a radical community psychology practice would seek interdisciplinary understanding about how oppression is caused and maintained, and use this understanding as a guide to appropriate action
Dialectical relationship between people and systems	community psychological praxis may provide opportunities for enhancing the creative, determining potential of people.
People's Consciousness	Community psychology must work as near to the people as possible, and in participation with them in order to challenge the status quo and achieve social change.

A key task of community psychological praxis is an educational one. Not educational in the traditional way of imparting information along a one way channel (what Freire refers to as the 'banking' approaches to education). Instead, the educational task requires a process that is characterised by dialogue between people, leading to greater 'conscientization' (Freire and Faundez, 1989 demonstrate the process whilst discussing the process in a 'talking book'). It is by sharing our perceptions of the world that we can begin to have dialogue. Francescato (2000) argued for interventions that encourage pluralistic interpretations, and that unite different kinds of knowledge: different types of knowledge, that is, that emanates from different people, different workers and different social discourses. It is through the sharing of information and perspectives on the world that we all become more aware of our place in it and the possibilities for constraint and change.

Table 3: Strategies for intervention and implications for community psychological praxis

Strategy for intervention	Community psychological praxis
Furtherance of critical consciousness: education	Community psychologists can work to develop dialogical relationships, which enable group conscientization, and possibilities for change. They must be prepared to share their 'expert' voice and remain open to learning.
Creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings)	Community psychologists can facilitate the bringing together of people with common interests, and their allies, and help them connect with others for greater power to change.
Development of alliances and counter systems	Community psychologists can work to develop alliances that will challenge the status quo, build a counter system and form part of wider emancipatory social movements
Giving psychology away	Community psychologists have opportunities to use psychological knowledge and expertise in liberatory ways: to make concepts and practices accessible and to develop participatory working relationships.

This process is known as a dialogic process, and assumes that "radical change can only come from consciousness developed as a result of exchange rather than imposition" (Leonard, 1975, p. 59). Through dialogic practice, the learner assumes the role of knowing subject in dialogue with the educator, so reality is demythologised: those who had been 'submerged' in oppressive social relations begin to understand these relations and the ideology that hides them, so recasting their social role with critical awareness. (Freire articulates this approach against the 'culture of silence' wherein oppressed people are prevented from what Doyal and Gough (1991) called 'critical autonomy' – the opportunity for participation in the political process. See Burton and Kagan (1996) for elaboration of this point.) It is through this process that learning takes place, and it is with greater conscientization that action for change is possible.

Humility and openness to learning ourselves, again, is required. Through the development of dialogical relationships, we will learn as much as any one else, and need to be prepared for our 'expert' knowledge to be challenged and seen to be incomplete. Nevertheless, our 'expert' voice can be used to speak with others, negotiate a common understanding and also to authenticate the voices of others.

"Social scientists as 'outsiders' imbued with objectivity have a responsibility to voice social criticism, seek contradictions between the perspectives of those in power and those victimized by oppressive structures, and validate the voices of those unheard" (Kidder and Fine, 1986, p.59)

A radical community psychological praxis would emerge through the formation of dialogic relationships with oppressed people, the contribution of our 'expert voice' and continued openness to learning.

Creation of new forms of social relations (new social settings)

As an intervention for change, conscientization will be relatively weak unless it is group conscientization. Leonard (1975, p.60) summarises the advantages of group education thus:

“The development of a critical consciousness, by which the demystification of political structures and economic relations takes place, enables a group and the individuals within it to assert their own humanity and to confront dehumanization systems”

By linking people together with others who share their experiences, or who are allies in wanting to fight to eliminate sources of oppression, radical community psychologists can work to develop dialogical relationships, within new social settings, which enable group conscientization, and possibilities for change.

Conscientization is one means by which people can begin to take power and use it for change – become empowered. Story telling within dialogic relationships has long been a tradition wherein people develop and retain a strong sense of culture and identity. Rappaport (1995) proposed a link between story telling, empowerment and the creation of settings. He suggests that empowerment² combined with narrative approaches is a way of pursuing a community psychological agenda.

“for many people, particularly those who lack social, political or economic power, the community, neighbourhood or cultural narratives that are available are either negative, narrow, ‘written’ by others for them, or all of the above. People who seek either personal or community change often find that it is very difficult to sustain change without the support of a collectivity that provides a new community narrative around which they can sustain changes in their own personal story ... the goals of empowerment are enhanced when people discover, or create and give voice to, a collective narrative that sustains their own personal life story in positive ways. This process is reciprocal, such that many individuals, in turn, create, change and sustain the group narrative.”
(p.796)

Once more, the power of the group over the individual is stressed. Radical community psychological praxis might find ways of enabling people to come together

² Empowerment is one of those concepts that is suffused with alternative meanings. Scuftan (1996, p. 260) suggests “Empowerment is not an outcome of a single event; it is a continuous process that enables people to understand, upgrade and use their capacity to better control and gain power over their lives”. We have argued elsewhere for a more political approach to empowerment (Burton and Kagan, 1996). Empowerment is a multi-layered concept, implying individual, interpersonal, group, social and structural change. It is also a concept that once was progressive and now is becoming incorporated by the establishment, with rafts of punitive social policies being introduced in the name of empowerment (for example the cutting of income support benefits for single mothers so they could be ‘empowered’ to go to work). For the time being, and notwithstanding the notion, implicit in the term, of empowerment being something that is done to passive recipients, we will continue to use the term.