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Author biographies

Emma Sampson's background is in community psychology and she is employed as Research Officer within the APS Public Interest team.

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Commentary

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As a community psychologist, working in advocacy for action on poverty can be a profoundly challenging, occasionally dispiriting and sometimes daunting affair. However, in the light of the immiseration enacted through the various apparatuses of

neoliberalism in recent years, such work is increasingly vital. For this reason I admire the authors' engagement with the Australian Social Inclusion Board's public consultation. The paper provides a much needed account of the potential role of community psychologists in practices of advocacy with regard to poverty and disadvantage and adds to the canon of work that challenges many normative, individualistic assumptions about poverty and suffering. In reiterating the problematic practices of identifying individual and familial deviance and focussing solutions on these, rather than thinking about the complex and dynamic nature of disadvantage, the authors should be commended.

Underlined for me is the need to now go further to provide a critically informed and reflective account of exactly *how* community psychologists might act as advocates when engaging with the various inclusion boards, public consultations, inquiries and fact finding exercises that facilitate the transfer of knowledge to political authorities from those anointed as experts.

Particularly useful would have been an exploration of the dynamics of advocacy. How do we make ourselves, as practitioners of community psychologies, relevant in these debates? How do we effectively hold governments to account as collectives of academics? What are the processes community psychologists should be involved in? How can this be done effectively and where are we best placed to intervene and build coalitions against the institutions that perpetuate poverty and disadvantage? Instead at times the statement largely constitutes an array of relatively undetailed progressive inclinations that most community psychologists will be familiar with from most generic texts in the field.

The statement provides an account of significant 'trends and challenges affecting disadvantage' but herein lie two of the key issues in contemporary critical thinking in

our field. Firstly when engaging with the apparatuses of political regimes, we often fail to sufficiently outline the ways in which the problems that we speak of are themselves the effects of specific political and economic regimes and practices. Secondly, this paper reflects the common tendency to focus the critical lens on the beneficial impact of neighbourhood and community-level activity. Such a focus is problematic when such communities are themselves located within damaging political and economic regimes. Indeed to talk of the issues of low pay, climate change and lack of affordable housing while extolling the need to widen our perspective to communities and neighbourhoods, is problematic but by no means limited to this paper. The reason that political advocacy is essential is that the frequently cited panacea of community and neighbourhood engagement and development, while frequently rewarding and worthwhile, will usually not sufficiently address many of the key problems affecting these communities.

Few in our field would disagree that there is a need for action on addressing poverty and disadvantage but all too rarely do we see what this action could look like. It would be useful for future authors articulating advocacy work to express specific action points for addressing poverty and disadvantage. There needs to be a focus now on practice rather than on principles. Most would agree with the list of principles that the APS acknowledges. However, it is necessary to spell out how we engage practically in order that some of these are meaningfully enacted. Generic progressive reflections like the need for participation, the need to promote the voices of disadvantaged people and the need to avoid stigmatization are no longer enough. In 2013 most of these progressive non-specifics have been co-opted into the policy statements of the governments and authorities that frequently contribute to practices of poverty and disadvantage. It would be useful for future work to reflect on how community

psychologists can keep such values central to their activity while resisting the problematic appropriation of these values by potentially damaging regimes.

Depending on your viewpoint, one potential further issue was the reference to 'community psychology' as a singular discipline throughout. To my mind there is considerable variation in the field, and a number of authors have made persuasive accounts for the existence of several 'community psychologies'. It would be useful for all authors in the field to better articulate what mode of community psychology they are advocating. The authors note that the APS is "well placed to contribute to this consultation by identifying psychological research and best practice as it relates to social inclusion and disadvantage". I am not well versed in the workings of the APS and so the following point may hold limited value. In the UK, similar claims for such intellectual territory have been made on behalf of advocates of the British Psychological Society (BPS). However, a number of academics from within the field of critical community psychology have problematised such claims. This is why definitions of community psychology are important. This paper and the statement itself contain unproblematised and uncritical representation of the variously stated commitments of the APS. Critical reflection is essential whenever we articulate the potential benefits of the national organisations that seek to represent psychology. Any organisation that potentially represents neuroscientists, cognitive therapists and critical community psychologists demands such scrutiny. Most psychological associations are replete with their commitment to progressive discourses like social justice and the addressing of disadvantage but only through sustained critical interrogation of these organisations are potentially problematic ideological foundations exposed. It would have been

useful for a paper like this to grasp this need for critical interrogation.

I admire what the authors have done and indeed that they took part in this inquiry. I stand in unity with their attempts to challenge normative reductionist attempts to misrepresent disadvantage and poverty. This commentary has been produced in a spirit of goodwill and solidarity and as a reminder that as community psychologists we need to be rigorous in our critical appraisal of the processes that we engage in.

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Authors' Reply

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We thank Carl Walker and the reviewers for their constructive feedback and solidarity with the intent of our paper. We presented our abridged submission as one way community psychologists can confront poverty by adopting an advocacy role within our respective organisations and positions, or indeed as researchers or academics. We accept the critique of the muted voice we found ourselves employing in attempting to infuse a mainstream APS submission with community psychology principles and practice examples. We were equally aware of how an APS submission on social inclusion would have sounded without our input, and saw it as an opportunity to illustrate to our own colleagues the value of tackling poverty at multiple levels, instead of condoning individualised, victim-blaming approaches. We emphasised neighbourhood/community level advocacy as a key approach that distinguishes community from mainstream psychology, based on our first-hand experience of (and involvement in evaluations demonstrating) its benefits. Community-based approaches can spearhead

and trial attempts to address structural causes of disadvantage, and can complement advocacy that is directed towards government policies and structures that frequently contribute to practices of poverty and disadvantage, as we advocated throughout the submission and paper. While we were conscious of the problematics of 'progressive non-specifics' and did touch on some advocacy-related actions (forming coalitions, working at multiple levels, strengthening local networks), elaborating such actions was beyond the scope of the paper, which was based on one submission. We look forward to continuing and expanding this focus on advocacy in the near future – and in our own right.