
The Features Of Community Social Work

There are many different types of 'community'. For example, it could be people sharing common interests, or people who are brought together by their geographical location. A community is something that people have in common that brings them together. A prime quality of a community is an element of trust and a positive community will share respect and can be known as the member's 'safe place' (Gudykunst, 2013). However, communities may not always be positive as there can be boundaries. For example, there may be a group of people who band together to form a community as they are not welcome outside the community.

Boundaries make communities too. There is no one universal definition of 'community'. Traditionally, there are three broad definitions of community. Community as locality, community as social network and community as relationship. However, I am just going to look at two of them. The first definition is community as social network. Indeed, 'a community is said to exist when a network of inter-relationships is established between people who live in the same locality' (Cree, 2010, p.121). For example, this could be a group of mothers living in a certain area. However, it is important to understand the limitations of communities that come under this definition. These types of communities may not always be a 'good' thing. It is depending on what the common interests of the community are and how they operate with their own members and people who are not in the community (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2016). Moreover, it has been argued that 'socio-spatial notions of community imply 'static' and fixed relationships that are merely accident of residency and lack any deeper motivation' (Gallent and Ciaffi, p. 6).

Therefore, it could be argued that these communities only come together due to geographical location and not for the greater good. The second definition is community as relationship (or 'communion'). Indeed, 'community is defined as a shared sense of identity between individuals, irrespective of any local focus or physical proximity' (Cree, 2010, p.121). For example, some people may feel belonging to particular religion. This concept of community can be seen as 'identity-driven' as it is established around sexuality, cultural beliefs or specific lifestyle choices (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2016). This concept of community links together with 'politically mobilised' and 'technological' concepts of community as they are all 'fluid' and free from spatial fixity (Gallen and Ciaffi, 2016). Indeed, with modernisation comes rapid mobilisation of protest groups, which brings together individuals linked together through different social medias and has become symbolic of the power of social networks to bring like-minded and like-motivated people together (Gallen and Ciaffi, 2016). This type of community is keeping up with the 21st Century by allowing communities to come together during the rapid growth of social media, and not having to worry about living next to the people who they share a community with. A real positive of this definition of community is that a shared interest providing a basis and rationale for interaction gives purpose to a community, giving it real strength and vibrancy (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2016). However, with these groups also comes limitations as they may fall apart just as quickly as they formed. But, other virtual networks appear to enjoy longevity, for example if they are focused on attempts to shape policies (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2016). Moreover, another limitation of this community is the risk of how they treat people who are not welcome in their community. Indeed, this could be a real negative as with communities comes boundaries where not everyone is welcome.

Why is Community Important in People's lives?

Poverty can best be described as lacking the resources to participate in society (Atal and Oyen, 1997). Poverty is usually measured with reference to a 'poverty line', meaning if you have an income of less than 60% of the median income (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2011). In the UK, there are many different causes of poverty. These include a lack of access to decent and secure work, and a lack of sufficient income. The UK government often says work is the solution to poverty, however there can be a lack of access to paid work due to lack of unemployment in specific areas, a lack of education, and disabilities. Indeed, on a recent visit to People First in Edinburgh, a service user told about how he feels employers only see him for his disability and not who he actually is as a person (Personal Communication, People First, 2018). There are many consequences of living in poverty. These can include social exclusion, social divisions, stigma, blame and isolation, and these impact not only the people living in poverty but their family and community too (What Works Scotland, 2017). These people who are struggling to make ends meet often find that they are stigmatised with personal, inappropriate characteristics given to them (What Works Scotland, 2017). Indeed, identity and belonging go hand in hand with poverty. Identity is a concept that refers to a person's distinctive sense of uniqueness. Identity is process rather than a thing (Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014). It is ongoing and always changing and developing over time. However, people can spoil one's identity by stigmatising (Goffman, 1963). This issue of stigma is often related with a number of 'out-groups', for example, those with disabilities, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol problems. On a visit to the Serenity Café in Edinburgh it was found that the members of the café come together as a community due to their shared sense of identity of recovery. These members have faced a lot of stigmatisation during their process of recovery, however they come together as a community to overcome this stigma of people with mental health and/or drug and alcohol problems by fundraising, hosting events to highlight the issues and so on. Therefore, community social work in the sense of community as relationship is important when it comes to poverty as it allows people living in poverty to have 'opportunities to reflect on and understand their situation and to articulate changes required to address their needs' (Combat Poverty Agency, 1993, p.20). It is said that for this to happen, those experiencing poverty must play a key role in policy making and policy changes that relate to their needs. Belonging and identity are closely linked. Indeed, people can learn a lot about themselves through relationships. When meeting a service user at the Serenity Café, who I will name Shannon on the basis of confidentiality, said that if it was not for the Café and all of its workers and team members then she would have killed herself. She said 'I did not even know who I was as a person before coming along to the café. I was throwing my life away. I had no family or friends left and I was essentially killing myself. However, thanks to the café I now have a sense of belonging and I have an identity. I am now a woman in full time education and volunteering to help other people that are in my past situation. I am not that girl that was throwing her life away on drugs and alcohol' (Shannon, Personal Communication, Serenity Café, 2018). Therefore, the importance of community social work in the sense of community as relationship is highlighted here as if it was not for Shannon's community she would not be here today. She was helped by people who had a shared sense of identity with her, and now she is doing the same for other members of her community. The practice of community development work tries to ensure that the people who have the least in society are assisted in accessing opportunities that the rest of society may take for granted as it is easy to access for them (Combat Poverty Agency, 1993). Indeed, on a recent visit to the Grassmarket Community Project in Edinburgh I found that this community organisation helps those with supported needs gain skills and have a sense of belonging that they would not have

before joining the social enterprise. For example, there are woodwork, sewing and guitar classes, as well as a choir group and cinema nights, and trips for people who have maybe never even been out of Edinburgh before. This shows a true advantage of community social work as it allows these people with the shared identity of perhaps homelessness, disability and so on to come together to gain skills that was once not accessible to them. This community organisation also is not restricted to those living in the Grassmarket area of Edinburgh as one service user told us how he takes two buses and a train just to get to the organisation everyday as he says, 'it is my only reason to get out of bed in the morning, otherwise I would sit in the house and vegetate and have no purpose to live' (Personal Communication, Grassmarket Community Project, 2018). Community as social network may not be a sufficient definition of community here for James as if he was limited to access the community project based on him living so far away then he would not be given these opportunities to have a purpose in life. Therefore, community social work is very important here and has many benefits for people to come together based on their shared identities and need for recovery, and not based on their local proximity. However, it is also important to understand the limitations of community social work as community as relationship. Indeed, community as relationship may fall apart just as quickly as they have formed, for example, if any threats arise or if they achieve an aim and there is no longer a need for the community. Furthermore, another limitation may be that people in these certain communities treat people out with the community very poorly. As long as the community is a 'good' thing and there is a real need for it then community as relationship can be argued to be the most compelling form of community.

Community Social Work

The term 'community social work' is most commonly associated with concepts of 'self-help, voluntarism and facilitating access to local services' (Forfe and Lynch, 2013, p. 2080). Therefore, 'community social work is an essential approach for social work practice that seeks to work preventively, alongside users within the communities where they live, to address the shared underlying problems, as well as presenting individual issues in their lives' (Turbett, 2018, p.1.). Indeed, it is recognised that if people do not get support as early as possible then this may lead to more problems later on in life. Community social work enables the social worker to move away from an individualistic approach of social work that predominantly takes place in a social work setting and challenges them to consider the individuals within their environments and how the two interact (Teater and Baldwin, 2012). Indeed, this shows the importance of community social work in that it acknowledges that not all problems or difficulties service users may have need to be solved by intervening with the individual, but rather they can be solved by intervening with the environment or community the individual associates with. Community social work of interest recognises that people are entwined with and inseparable from the social environment and that strengthening their community helps to solve individual, as well as shared problems (Turbett, 2018).

Indeed, this was evident on my visit to the Serenity Café where anti-oppressive practice is embedded. This is a core quality of community social work of interest where it makes the organisation less formal and more community orientated. However, it makes decision making more stressful. By having no hierarchy in the organisation this means that their community is strengthened as no one is better than the other and they allow service users to grow and develop at their own pace, in their own way (Personal Communication, Serenity Café, 2018). This is a positive quality of community social work as no one is forcing them to do things they

don't want to do, however all members at the café must be willing to recover. The members can receive help and offer help to other members and those in recovery which helps in their own recovery, development and growth as they can use their own and similar experiences to help others around them in the café community. Theory states that community social work sees collective as well as individual activity as valuable, building social capital and avoiding marginalisation (Turbett, 2018). I found this to be true at the Serenity Café in that everyone is going through their own journey, however these journeys may be similar to another member in the café as so they can develop and grow in their community together. People, for example in addiction, may not have the resources to recover fully by themselves, and this can add to the fact that they feel very lonely and isolated (Personal communication, Serenity Café, 2018). However, the café allows them to empower each other, reducing stress and its consequences.

Therefore, community social work is very important to people's lives as it allows them to empower and be empowered. It gives them access to local services that before may not have been accessible, and avoids marginalisation in that everyone comes together based on shared identities/beliefs. This helps break down the "us vs them" stigma in that everyone in the café is seen as equals instead of it being the social worker at the top and the service user underneath them. Theory also states that community social work can be known as 'patch social work' meaning social work in a particular geographical neighbourhood (Turbett, 2018). However, at the Serenity Café, the café is open to anyone to come in to join the community, regardless of your geographical location. Anyone can come in to use the café's facilities, however the members of the café community help one another to overcome addiction. It does not matter where the person lives, as long as they want to actively begin or further their recovery process. Therefore, literature seems to say that community is based on geographical location, however in real life this not always true. Communities can be based purely on geographical location; however, this may mean that they lack deeper meaning other than their location. Community of interest means that these people with the shared need to recover can come together in their community, and they do not need to worry about not being welcomed based on their geographical location. Indeed, these communities can keep up with the 21st century in that they could build their community online on social media, instead of anyone being excluded from the community based on where they live. Indeed, the Serenity Café is already taking this on board by having a Facebook page. People who are interested in joining the community can message the Facebook page at any time and get a quick response to any of their questions or needs. This does put a strain on the social worker in charge of the Serenity Café as she is working unsociable hours and needs to be available whenever she is needed. The community social worker at the Café was very proud of her role and happy to go out of her way to help her clients, however it is a worry that she may burn out over time and the existence of the café may be in jeopardy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no one definition of community. There is community as locality, community as social network and community as relationship. Based on recent visits and reading literature based on community social work, I believe community social work to have many benefits, although some limitations too. Benefits include looking at individuals in their community as seeing how that can help them with any issues they may have and how they interact in them. However, a limitation of community social work theory states often that community is based on geographical location which evidently is not the case.

Also, I believe community as relationship to be the most compelling definition of community. This is based on the fact that community as social network may be seen to be based purely on the fact that people with certain interests/identities live in a certain area. It could be said that they do not have any deeper significance, and these communities may be seen not to be a necessarily 'good' thing, it is all depending on what their common interests are and how they treat people out with their own community. On the other hand, community as relationship from my experience seems to best fit the idea of community social work. Indeed, these communities can come together based purely on their common beliefs, goals or identities. This type of community does not need to share the same locality; indeed, they could form their community online on social media. Therefore, this does not limit anyone from joining the community as relationship. It is important to also understand that community as relationship also has its limitations. Certainly, these communities can fall apart very quickly if there is no real goal or need for the community and there is an issue with how people are treated out with the tightknit communities.

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