
Exploring the spread of community development ways of working by practitioners

Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference, New Researchers' sessions 2014

Jen Wingate, Durham University, j.s.wingate@durham.ac.uk

Date submitted: 04/08/2014

Abstract

Community development is practice applied by paid workers and volunteers to facilitate community activity and build capacity. Previous research has sought to explore the contested nature of community development. However, there has been less research on how practitioners develop their practice. The concept of social contagion has been developed, in a range of different fields, to explain how social phenomena pass between individuals. This research explored the adoption and promotion of community development ways of working from this conceptual perspective through a mixed method qualitative approach in three case study areas. The preliminary findings indicate that the phenomena being transmitted can be broadly categorised as general practices, values-based ways of working or particular techniques. These were spread through informal or systematic mechanisms. The implications of emerging findings relate how policies, organisations and practitioners can create environments that are more, or less, conducive to the spread of community development practices.

Paper

Conference paper for The Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference – New Researchers' Session 2014

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Jen Wingate

Postgraduate Researcher, School of Applied Social Science, Durham University

j.s.wingate@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Community development is practice applied by paid workers and volunteers to facilitate community activity and build capacity. Previous research has sought to explore the contested nature of community development. However, there has been less research on how practitioners develop their practice. The concept of social contagion has been developed, in a range of different fields, to explain how social phenomena pass between individuals. This research explored the adoption and promotion of community development ways of working from this conceptual perspective through a mixed method qualitative approach in three case study areas. The preliminary findings indicate that the phenomena being transmitted can be broadly categorised as general practices, values-based ways of working or particular techniques. These were spread through informal or systematic mechanisms. The implications of emerging findings relate how policies, organisations and practitioners can create environments that are more, or less, conducive to the spread of community development practices.

Introduction

The emerging findings outlined in this paper arise from research that considered how community development practitioners, in paid or unpaid roles, became involved in community development and learnt their practices. It then explored whether these practitioners passed on any of those approaches to people they interacted with. In order to understand this process the research has drawn on the concept of social contagion, seeking to understand its applicability to community development. This paper sets the research in context, briefly outlines the research methods, and then highlights some emerging findings in relation to the nature of what is transmitted and the mechanisms used.

Literature Review

Community development an enduring field

For over six decades, community development has been used to describe numerous collective actions. It has been viewed in many ways, and called upon to address a wide range of issues. It has been applied to assist in the delivery of a range of public policies, including in regeneration, the design and delivery of services, and strengthening democracy (Gilchrist, 2005; IDeA, 2009). For example, it has been a central part of urban regeneration and anti-poverty programmes ranging from the 1970s Community Development Project (CDP) (Baldock, 1979; CDP Inter-Project Editorial Team, 1977; CDP Working Group, 1974) through to the Neighbourhood Renewal programme of the 2000s (Cabinet Office, 2001).

This brief overview demonstrates that community development is an enduring concept that has adapted in response to political, social, economic and technological changes. There appears to be a set of practices or ways of working applied over many years. Community development has been described as a set of practices that are people- and process-oriented (Ewert and Grace, 2000). These practices have included the role of practitioners in networking people within and between communities, as well as dialogical approaches (Westoby and Dowling, 2013) that seek transformative learning among the participants (Boucouvalas et al, 2010). Whilst these and other authors have recognised the educational potential of community development and the role of practitioners in the development of skills and capacity with those that they work with, there has been less acknowledgment of the role they play in spreading community development ways of working.

Contagions – medical, metaphorical and social

One area of study that is able to understand complex interactions that lead to phenomena spreading between people is epidemiology and the associated research into contagions. Epidemiology has been variously defined (Coggan, et al., 2003; Gillam, et al., 2007; Lilienfeld, 1976; Webb, et al., 2005); its core purpose is exploring and explaining the patterns of spread and the determinants of disease. Social epidemiology, a branch within epidemiology, is concerned with “the study of the relations between ‘social factors’ and disease in populations” (Kaufman, et al., 1999:113). For example, Farmer (2001a, 2001b, 2005, 2006) developed a bio-social framework that acknowledged factors at the levels of the individual and the social-context that influenced the spread of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Studies of contagion seek to understand the mechanisms of transmission and the factors that influence susceptibility or resistance to a disease.

On first appearances, the idea of applying the concept of contagion to the area of community development practice learning may seem wholly unprecedented. However, epidemic is often used metaphorically to describe social phenomenon, such as “a positive epidemic of civic engagement” (Putnam et al., 2004:241). Additionally, the concept of social contagion has been developed through research in a number of areas where there is a connection between social factors and the spread of a phenomenon amongst people, such as medically non-communicable health outcomes (Christakis and Fowler, 2007 and 2012), violence (Fagan, et al., 2007), gun crime (Skogan, 2008), attitudes to risk (Cohen and Prinstein, 2006) and adoption of innovation (Burt, 1987). Fagan et al. (2007:691) note

that this approach enables the examination of the mechanisms (such as “communication and imitation”), forms of social interactions and contacts which enable the phenomenon to spread and that influence susceptibility.

Christakis and Fowler (2010) have identified a number of common elements found in social contagions, such as the behaviours of individuals being influenced by people separated by up to three degrees away from them (so a person’s friends-friends-friends), there being actual connections between the people in the network, and increased likelihood of adoption depending on individual characteristics and context.

There are a number of reasons why a social contagion perspective could potentially offer something to the understanding of how community development practitioners adopt practices. First, is the interest in networks, from the social contagion perspective networks can be seen as pathways through which a phenomenon is spread, this can be linear or with reinforcing loops. In community development network formation has been viewed as a practice approach and an outcome (Gilchrist, 2009). Secondly, the social contagion perspective is interested in actual connections between people within a network as a place of uni- or bi-directional exchange. Dialogical approaches to community development emphasise discussion-based interactions. Also, definitions highlight the collective nature of community development (CLG, 2007). Thirdly, the perspective considers both individual characteristics and context in tandem. The overview above demonstrated that community development is a situated practice that adapts to the context and the individuals involved. Finally, the perspective is interested in those involved, their interactions and the ways in which those interactions operate to achieve certain outcomes. This is similar to community development practice being viewed as a people- and process-oriented.

Community development and networks

During the 1990s, networks and their relation to society increasingly became an area of interest in sociological and political thought. Additionally interest in social capital was increasing, drawing on Putnam’s work (1993, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002). A number of UK community-related policies drew on this concept (CLG, 2008; Marmot Review, 2010). Gilchrist (2009) argued that practitioners network individuals, connect people within a community, and support communities to make contacts with other communities and holders of power. Thus create ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ forms of social capital (Baum and Zierch, 2003).

Gilchrist et al. (2010) highlighted that “[f]or community development, the challenge is to ... find ways of supporting people to organise around their preferred issues and interests” (cited in Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011:121), and suggested that the role of workers should be to create “new gathering places” (ibid, 2011:141). New networks supporting community development can form in these spaces (Gilchrist, 2009). The importance of this type of network formation has been demonstrated in a number of research projects in Canada (for example: Dale and Newman, 2008; Dale and Sparkes, 2008, 2011) and the UK (Rowson et al., 2010 and Morris and Gilchrist, nd, Morgan-Trimmer, 2014). Social networks play an important role in the “... twofold purpose [of community development] – to “release the potential within communities” and to “change the relationships

between people in communities and the institutions which shape their lives” (Taylor, 1992 cited in Gilchrist, 1993:196-197).

Definitions of community development

Community development is a contested term; this can be illustrated through the varied ways in which it has been described, defined and applied. Some definitions are focused on the desired goals or outcomes (e.g. SCCD (1990) cited in Taylor, 1992:6); others are focused on the underpinning values and principles (e.g. Batten, 1975:102; Ledwith, 2007:285); further definitions contain a combination of outcomes, values and principles (for example: CDX, 2009; LLUK, 2009; Craig, et al., 2004; UN (1955) cited in Mayo, 1974:6).

For the purposes of this research the practices associated with the definitions below are what has been considered. The definition developed by the *Community Development Challenge* group, describes community development as a specific,

“set of values and practices which plays a special role in overcoming poverty and disadvantage, knitting society together at the grass roots and deepening democracy” (CLG, 2007:13).

It goes on to define the values and principles as being “1. Social justice 2. Self-determination 3. Working and learning together 4. Sustainable communities 5. Participation 6. Reflective practice” (ibid:14). This is similar to the definition of the International Association for Community Development which argues that:

“Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities ... It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies ... to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. ... It has a set of core values/social principles covering human rights, social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity; and a specific skills and knowledge base.” (Craig et al., 2004:2).

Whilst these community development definitions focus upon values, principles and ultimate outcomes, it is often acknowledged that the processes can result in benefits, even if the ultimate goal had not yet been realised (Barr and Hashagen, 2000). For example, the processes can develop the knowledge and networks of participants. Community development practices or ways of working can be understood as including working *with* not *for* people, identifying the issues that are important to people, seeking change through collective activity (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011). The values and principles of community development can be enacted through these practices.

Methods

Whilst the ways of working can be described based on the literature, the research recognises that community development is a situated practice; as such practitioners may have developed their own conceptualisations and understandings of community development based on the context in which they operate and their previous experiences. Consequently, the first research question asked how practitioners understood community development practices. Subsequent research questions explored how community development ways of working were learnt by practitioners, whether these were passed on to those they worked with, and if so what mechanisms were used and what factors supported or hindered the transmission.

The research had a two-phase qualitative design. The first consisted of semi-structured interviews with fifteen selected key actors who have influenced the field during the last forty years. The interviews explored understandings of community development, influences on the field and changes in the nature of practice over time. The second phase sought to understand the experience of practitioners, both the nature of their practice, how they learnt their practices, and whether these were passed on to other people. As community development is a situated practice a multiple case study based approach was adopted. Three case study areas were chosen on the basis of distance and difference for criteria including: dominant practice traditions, policy context and level of rurality/urbanity. The three areas were the West End of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK; rural Suffolk, UK; and rural Nova Scotia, Canada. In each area four people who used community development practices were purposively sampled. They were asked to nominate people they thought had adopted some of their ways of working, from these nominations further practitioners were sampled based on nomination relationship chains of up to four people long, forming a total sample of 43 people. Data were collected principally through semi-structured interviews, and then supplemented by map annotation and walking interviews, participant observations and participatory workshops. Context conversations were conducted with 47 people who were influential in shaping community development activity in the case study areas. The data is being qualitatively analysed to explore understandings of community development, the nature of what is passed, how it is transmitted and the factors that enable or hinder this. The analysis is on-going, and so this paper considers selected emerging themes that will be refined and developed further through the analysis. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

What is being passed on?

The preliminary findings indicate that the phenomena being passed on could be considered as a typology with three main groupings: particular techniques, general ways of working, or practice informed by community development values and principles.

Specific techniques

When talking about the ways of working that they have learnt or that have been transmitted to others, a number of participants talked about specific tools or techniques. These included specific community planning tools, techniques for community priority setting, and tools around facilitation.

“even when you’re on training, people use particular tools or a particular ice breaker or something like that ... Activities, games, all those sorts of things ...” (Anna, Newcastle)

“... [a colleague] learnt a technique around priority setting ... so that is a tool or technique that we pull out many, many times to use with a group.” (Georgina, Nova Scotia)

“Yeah so Art of Hosting” (Fred, Nova Scotia)

These were tools or techniques that had been clearly designed for a purpose and there was a systematised presentation of the approach. As can be seen from the quotes, some of these were small tools, others were more complex techniques that include a range of approaches. In these cases it is clear that the approach has been passed on and the participants were able to talk about how they learnt the approach.

General practices

Participants also described ways of working that could be viewed as general practices that are used by a range of occupations. These approaches include things such as partnership working, networking and event organising.

“... if we work together, then we can certainly form a good partnership. And then we encourage them to take ownership of their own area” (Liam, Suffolk)

“Then we had a networking session which I thought was really important because it’s not only what you probably find information-wise at the sessions, but it’s also what you find from each other that’s interesting.” (Katy, Suffolk)

“what I love about working here as well is that I’ve learnt loads about working as part of a community” (Christy, Newcastle)

These were ways of working that were not unique to community development, yet they were transmitted in community development settings. Unlike the elements in the preceding category, they are generally not codified or articulated clearly in guides, but they are more subtle approaches which adapt to the context and the people involved. This means that understanding the

transmission relied on the reflections of the participants on what approaches they consider that they have picked or that they have passed on to others. Whilst approaches such as partnership working are used by a range of different practitioners, some participants noted that they took a different approach to it compared to how other occupations have, for example trying to ensure that community members had a voice and an equal place in a partnership. This leads into the third broad grouping.

Values informed practices

This third group of ways of working are informed by, or are an enactment of, the values and principles of community development, such as inclusion, capacity building, reflective practice and building relationships.

“I suppose, like, the whole thing about giving people options, not being prescriptive, about being inclusive.” (Doug, Newcastle)

“... facilitating and building safe spaces.” (Flo, Nova Scotia)

“And we always try to build the capacity building component into our work, so we’ll hire people from the communities to work with us. ... so we kind of all come out of it richer.” (Gemma, Nova Scotia)

“I think in small ways they would reflect on that experience and make some changes in their personal behaviour or their communication. ... in the ways that they’re interacting with others” (Fiona, Nova Scotia)

As with the last grouping, these are not systematised techniques, rather they are ways of working that require reflection on the practice and its impacts. These practices can be viewed as being more distinctively community development (although similar approaches can be found in other strands of community practice see Banks, 2003). Potentially, for these ways of working to be transmitted, people need to be aware of both the approach and the values and principles that underpin it. Through the analysis, aspects of this will be explored, for example the way that participants described their personal values and the values they see as being embedded within community development, and how the people who adopted the practices viewed those values.

How are community development ways of working passed on?

Through the analysis so far, it seems that the mechanisms through which practitioners spread and adopt practices can be categorised broadly as systematised, informal and modelling.

Mechanism - systematised

The systematised mechanisms included the development of toolkits, delivery of workshops, courses and training programmes.

“... we had quite a lot of information in toolkit format.” (Katy, Suffolk)

“... we do the work with adults ... giving them tools or ways, I don't know, I don't think really best practices, but some of the promising practices that we have around some of the other ways that we can help young people.” (Flo, Nova Scotia)

“We'll develop interview guides together and we'll get them to practice interviewing with people. And then they go and do some of the interviews with support and then we'll work on the data analysis, show them all the steps” (Gemma, Nova Scotia)

These provided opportunities to share the ways of working that had been developed and tested by the practitioner, for example in the style of 'how to' guides. Whilst these were structured presentations of a practice, they recognised the context-dependent nature of community development, and so there was some adapting of the approach. For example Evan (in Nova Scotia) talked about the development of a community strategy planning tool, which had the same overall steps but these were adapted to meet the needs of different communities. He facilitated the process, which led him to revise/improve the tool.

Mechanism - informal

Most of the research participants talked about using informal mechanisms in the learning of their own practice and in sharing it with others. This included storytelling, observing other practitioners and mentoring.

“Hearing those stories ... where we'd share our skills – just phenomenal learning, just amazing” (Hannah, Nova Scotia)

“Well in a general way I'd like to think that everybody I work with picks up something, because I pick up something from everybody else.” (Christy, Newcastle)

“some of the mentors that I have had, they have been really great. So that's how I am all the time.” (Anna, Newcastle)

Unlike the first set of mechanisms, these were not structured in nature. Instead, they were more fluid and based on relationships between people. Enablers of this type of mechanism included the receptiveness of the person adopting the practice, how open the person originating the practice was to sharing, and the relationship being longer-term and trusting. When describing how he transmitted a practice, Fred (in Nova Scotia) recognised that his role changed from being intense to light touch as the person developed their skills and confidence in applying the practice. Research

participants talked about actively looking for practices, seeing how other people worked and deciding which elements of this to take into their own practice.

Mechanism - modelling

Modelling was used by a number of participants to share their practice approaches. This was about demonstrating the ways of working by doing.

“... he told me that I had played a huge part in that. That my presence [pause] that he had learnt so much from me around working with people and being passionate and questioning.” (Flo, Nova Scotia)

“So I guess what I would say is we try to model practices, ... it is to model practices and talk about them and think about being intentional but in terms of deliberate skill building.” (Georgina, Nova Scotia)

“Being a role model to the women” (Carol, Newcastle)

“We hope that, in some way, we are able to model that sort of approach and pass it on both internally and externally.” (Daniel, Newcastle)

When describing this mechanism, participants related it to the way that they could demonstrate values and principles through actions, such as *“... it is about trying to model that, being empowering ...”* (Zara, Key Actor). This is a form of alignment between a person and the practices in question, one participant described this: *“I think [it] is the importance of congruency, in terms of what we say and what we do, what we value and how we practice.”* (Yvonne, Nova Scotia).

Social contagion in a community development practice sharing context - a brief reflection

One aspect that has been highlighted through the research is that when considering their own learning and adoption of practice they frequently cited individuals that they had learnt from. In contrast, practitioners rarely reflect on their influence on those they work with in terms of the transmission of community development practices. One clear exception was when they designed toolkits or courses to develop skills or knowledge.

Overall though there does seem to be a dichotomy emerging in the analysis, between the ease of responding to questions about ‘what I have learnt from others’ and the relative difficulty of

answering questions about 'who has learnt from me' and 'which of my practices might have been adopted'. The former, inward-looking questions, were easier to answer, responses included learning from peers, managers and mentors, often naming individuals. This demonstrates that people were clear about having developed their suite of practices, at least in part, by drawing on the practices of others. However, the latter set of questions, which are more outward-looking on an individual's potential influence on others, were more difficult to answer. There was limited difficulty in answering generally what others had learnt from them, but it was particularly difficult for some when they were asked to name specific people during the nomination process. One participant clearly explained the difference, "*often I think about people who have influenced me. I've never really thought about how I've influenced others, except for mentoring*" (Fiona, Nova Scotia).

It is planned that this dichotomy will be considered further as the analysis progresses. But initial thoughts about this include the reticence of some participants to be seen as 'claiming' an influence on others, so seeming boastful, arrogant or being unduly influential. Together with a view that there was a process of mutual exchange and learning rather than a one-way passing on of skills, "*I find this question really hard, as I feel that I learn as much from other people as they do from me, because it is like a constant exchange.*" (Felicity, Nova Scotia). Also that practice adoption may not be immediate, for example, "*Some individuals take information and make obvious actions and changes. And others, they're hidden. And some, reality is you know you're not having that huge an impact on right now. But it really is challenging to measure the impact that you do have on people.*" (Elizabeth, Nova Scotia). Additionally, whilst reflective practice is seen as a way of working, it tended to be more focused on project outcomes and process improvement rather than on how the people a practitioner works with have been influenced or what community development skills will remain after the contact or relationship ceases. As one participant noted "*I think it is just really difficult to know what other people learn. I don't ask people that.*" (Gemma, Nova Scotia).

Next Steps

In addition to these emerging themes others are also becoming apparent, such as the place of personal values in relation to the values of community development, and the position of personal opinions. Emerging themes will be explored further as the analysis progresses, with the aim of identifying potential elements of a model or theoretical conceptualisation of community development practice learning from a social contagion perspective.

Practitioners' thoughts about adopting their own practice were contrasted to the transmission of their practice to others. An implication of the dichotomy is that practitioners' could better recognise the passing on of community development practices to others through reflexive practice. If this were better understood, along with the factors that make practice adoption more likely, then there is potential to enhance both the awareness of the influence that practitioners already have on those around them, as well as to enhance the effectiveness of the transmission of community development ways of working.

These findings indicate a range of practices were spread from individual to individual, and that people adopted practices in a variety of ways. The implications of this relate to the different ways in which policies, organisations and practitioners can create environments that are more, or less, conducive to the transmission of community development practices. This in turn could support the development of stronger community sector organisations and communities.

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