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Images for Change: Community Development, Community Arts and Photography

Abstract

This article explores how community development objectives can be achieved through critical photographic practice. The article summarises the literature relating to community arts practice and its potential for social regeneration. Photography is then located within this context and explored as a critical practice, with particular attention being given to photo-elicitation, photo-novella and photovoice methods. The literature is discussed and analysed to explore how far critical photographic practice can meet the objectives of community development.

Keywords: community development, community arts, regeneration, photography,

Introduction

Henri Lefebvre commented that bureaucracy and patterns of consumption control the modern world, and an effect of this process is that social and cultural life is changing from a *subject* rich in experience to *object* of social organisation. Although the language of empowerment is spoken by development focussed agencies, community based organisations are often treated by state and local state as objects to be organised, rather than independent subjects controlling their own future.

Similarly, it has been argued that as a result of increasing interest by government in, and direction of community development activity, the new social and community partnerships which dominate development work in the UK and Ireland “have borne very limited fruit and there has been considerable opportunity cost in terms of loss of time dedicated to other actions for social change” (Murphy 2002). Of course it is never as clear cut as this and community development practice is itself a site of contest between the implementation of state policy, bureaucratic managerial control, workers values and interests and community generated issues.

Community based change comes through the interplay of Foucauldian power discourses at the personal, group and institutional levels, and competing expressions of culture. From a Gramscian position this is essentially a struggle between the dominant hegemony and attempts to create counter hegemonies. Increasingly, many practitioners and academics (for example, Ledwith 2003 and Mayo 1999) see the future of community development being informed by the ideas of Freire (1972) and Gramsci (Hoare and Smith 1971). The lessons from recent struggles around identity, gender and race also reassert that it is necessary to practice community development in terms of values, rights, culture and power (Williams 2004).

In a previous article (Purcell 2004) the author has explored how the basic methodology of Freire enables us to see community development as a process both for individual and community empowerment. This process can be summarised as using coded material (photographs, drawings, poems, short plays) which facilitate community members to *reflect* on the current circumstances of their life. In Freire’s

terms, people are supported to develop an understanding of social and cultural processes, and as C Wright Mills once said see *private troubles as public issues*. Freire termed this as moving from a naive to critical consciousness and challenging what he called *boundary situations* through which people limit themselves and their potential for action. As critical consciousness develops people create a vision of how their life and the local community might be. From the vision a *plan* for change can be made, leading to community *action*.

The question is how this critical reflection process can best be put into action. Community arts have come in and out of favour as a community development approach. However, it is becoming clear that community use of photography can be used to give voice to, and make visible, otherwise hidden groups and community based issues. The next section explores the literature which links community arts and development. The section following discusses the literature on photography and community development.

Community Arts and Development

The British Council comments that, “The importance of creativity in addressing issues within urban regeneration and social exclusion has been widely recognised over the past ten years and examples exist across the world.” Much of the focus here has been on the development of urban ‘cultural quarters’ that provide a base for inner city economic and environmental regeneration. However, the Council notes that “social and community arts are not just about the regeneration agenda; they are also about ordinary people developing their own creative talents and expressing them.” This position has been explored by Landry and Matarasso (1996), Braden and Mayo (1999) and Carey and Sutton (2004). The Community Arts Network report (Burnham et al. 2004) identified that community cultural development (the objective of community arts) is concerned with democracy and the hearing of people’s voices, social justice and equity, and diversity.

A report for the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport by Evans and Shaw (2004) identified three types of linkage between cultural practice and regeneration: *culture-led regeneration* where cultural activity is the 'engine' of regeneration usually through large capital projects (galleries, museums, garden festivals, etc.), *cultural regeneration* where cultural activity is integrated into other regeneration strategies, and *culture and regeneration* where the cultural activity is small scale and not coordinated with the main regeneration programme. The authors summarise the contribution of culture to the social aspects of regeneration as including: changes in perceptions of place, increased confidence and aspiration, increased volunteering, increased social capital, stronger relationships between community and government, improved educational attainment.

The British based children's charity, Barnardos, concluded that "arts projects have become an important part of community development strategies" (Newman et al 2001). In particular community arts practice is expected to have significant impacts on the generation of local social capital (Kay and Watt 2000). The Barnardos report explores how community arts can lead to qualitative improvements in the quality of life with particular stress given to community health. For example Jones (1988) in a study of work in the USA undertaken by a resident artist for the South East Colorado Arts Council identified an increased sense of community and local participation in community affairs. However, participation was greatest amongst the higher social classes with minimal participation from Chicanos, renters and newcomers to the community. A study of Gaelic festivals by Matarasso (1996) reported that the majority of interviewees claimed increased confidence, the development of new skills, acquisition of new friends across diverse backgrounds, and improved community empowerment and self determination. In a Australian review of the social impact of the arts (Williams 1997) respondents claimed improved communication, increased understanding of different cultures, better consultation between government and community, reduced isolation and improved recreational opportunities. Lowe (2000) in a study of two Denver neighbourhoods reported reduced isolation, increased sense of neighbourhood identity, the identification of common community concerns and the development of a sense of place.

These are significant claims for community development benefits. Not considered in detail here, but important to note are associated claims by community arts advocates for increased employment and economic activity and the learning of new skills. However, it is hard to quantify what these outputs from arts activity actually mean to a particular geographic area or community. Although it is reasonable to assume significant outcomes for individuals (new personal interests, jobs, skills, etc.) it is harder to know if there are tangible and sustainable outcomes for the wider community. The Barnardos authors also give a word of warning that although development outcomes are a benefit of community arts practice, it is counterproductive to subvert artistic endeavour solely for development ends. Evans (2004) suggest that there is also the danger that the ‘cultural quarter’ approach can lead to the gentrification of existing communities with the inward migration of higher income groups. This can give the impression of successful development whilst masking the displacement of the existing population.

It seems reasonable to conclude that community arts can lead to a range of positive benefits for a community. However, this is not inevitably the case and Schwarzman (1993) exploring of the role of the arts in promoting social transformation identifies a number of misconceptions: that the arts are intrinsically progressive, that the impact of artistic ventures can always be measured, and that artistic production is about objects. Schwarzman argues that for art to promote transformation it has to differentiate “between art that is about politics, and art that is political. It is not enough for art to represent a political event for others to observe. It must also provide a context within which others can take action”. This definition takes us closer to the Freirian driven community development process outlined above.

The potential contribution of photography to community development

There are several critical questions we need to pose of photography in this context. How does photography function within the framework of community development and community arts, what is the potential contribution of photography in creating and

sustaining community networks, how effective is it as a vehicle for developing critical consciousness, understanding culture and challenging personal boundaries for the development of individuals and communities, and how does photographic practice fit with a politicised context that facilitates action?

Traditionally, photography has been used in community development for creating histories of people and places and as a campaigning tool through creating photographs for posters, newsletters and press releases. Photography as community based practice can be delivered in three ways: as formal or non formal courses delivered in a community setting mainly as skill development for individuals, through worker led initiatives such as 'photographer in residence' schemes that may or may not have a development purpose, or as a community driven initiative with a defined development objective. An unpublished survey of these activities in the UK (Purcell 2005) suggests that the course delivery method is majority approach with the community driven variant the least common. Overall, these projects could be characterised in community arts terms as culture and regeneration, there being little evidence of their systematic integration into regeneration strategies. However, it is the community driven initiative approach that has the potential to contribute most to community development and the approach that we shall now analyse.

There are several ways of using photography as a developmental tool. These methods include photo-elicitation, photo-novella and photovoice. All of which can be delivered in the context of Freirian practice and to challenge hegemonic processes.

The photo-elicitation method was originally developed by anthropologists, who used photographs of ritual activities as a basis for exploring activity and meaning. Essentially, photographs are taken of the subject under consideration and are used to trigger discussion. For example it can be more effective to ask community members to describe what they see and feel about a photograph of young people in a local street, compared to just asking a question. Collier (1979) in commenting on the photo-elicitation method said, "picture interviews were flooded with encyclopaedic community information whereas in the exclusively verbal interviews, communication difficulties and memory blocks inhibited the flow of information."

Photo-elicitation has been used in a variety of ways: ethnic identification (Gold 1986), understanding behaviour (Entin 1979, Wessels 1985), enhanced memory retrieval (Aschermann et al. 1998), work with young children and school students (Diamond 1996, Weiniger 1998), programme evaluations (Tucker and Dempsey 1991), and for exploring difficult and abstract concepts (Bender et al 2001).

The success of the photo-elicitation method has led to the development of a number of associated techniques. For example autodiving (see Heisley and Levy 1991) has been developed by market researchers from photo-elicitation practice. In this context photographs are taken of consumers and used as a device for them to explore their behaviour. Although the purpose here is for improved marketing of products the decoding process and exploration of behaviour has parallels with social developmental uses of photography. Similarly, Reflexive Photography is based on people photographing on a set subject, for example students perception of their university (Harrington and Lindy 1998) and using the photographs as a basis for discussion.

The advantage of these approaches is that it is easy to produce the photographs for discussion. All that is usually required is a descriptive picture of the subject concerned and with modern cameras (cheap disposable film or basic digital) no technical knowledge is required. The inherent problem though, is that the photographs in the photo-elicitation method are taken by the worker to ensure the photographs are of the correct subject. This opens up the possibility of the worker creating the issue or subject for discussion rather than facilitating the community members to explore and create their own issues.

In contrast the photo-novella, or picture stories method partially redresses the power balance through the community members undertaking the photography themselves. Hurworth (2003) comments, "A key component of the photo novella process is dialogue where participants show their photographs and talk about their significance and meaning. This grounding of the images in real experience is the key and makes the photographs infinitely more valuable than a set of images created by outsiders. Consequently, photo novella is meant to be a tool of empowerment enabling those

with little money, power or status to communicate to policymakers where change should occur.”

However it is often the case that it is workers or policymakers that set the subject for the photo-novella so community member can still be following somebody else’s agenda. There have also been situations where there is conflict over the ownership, reproduction and distribution of the photographs (for example Booth and Booth 2003). On the one hand the community members claiming ownership as the photographs were of a personal nature, with the sponsoring organisation on the other hand claiming ownership on the grounds they had initiated and funded the project and therefore owned the copyright of the images.

Photovoice was developed in the USA by Caroline C Wang and Mary Ann Burris when homeless men in Ann Arbor were given cameras to document their lives from their own perspective. The resulting photographs were exhibited and used as publicity and campaigning materials on issues relating to homelessness. This proved to be a politically powerful approach *because* the photographs documented the daily reality of the people concerned. Wang and Burris (1997) suggest that the photovoice method integrates theoretical perspectives on critical education, feminist theory and documentary photography to the existing work around photo-novellas: the essential factor is that local people become the *subject* of their own investigation rather than the *object* of an external agencies concern

Usually, photovoice practice identifies three goals: enabling people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and problems, promoting dialogue and issues through photographs and discussions, and as a route for the engagement of policymakers. Wang and Burris also outline the stages for developing a project, this includes: conceptualizing the problem and devising the initial theme, conducting photovoice training, considering ethical issues in photographing people and communities, defining broader goals and objectives, taking pictures, codifying issues, themes, and theories, facilitating group discussion, critical reflection and dialogue, reaching policy makers, donors, media, researchers, and others who may be mobilized to create change.

In the UK Photovoice is a specific project that describes itself as training “marginalised and disadvantaged groups worldwide in photojournalism skills.. providing a network and forum for participatory photography projects around the world...providing short term training and consultancy.. promoting the images produced”. Its projects “give voice to those who are too often ignored or silenced...encourage participants to gain confidence.. and become advocates for change” (photovoice.org). The images from the project are disseminated for publicity, fundraising and educational purposes. Unlike the USA projects images are for sale and promotional exhibitions have been held in over 40 venues worldwide

The UK office support projects overseas; for example in Nepal with Bhutanese refugees, Cameroon on health issues around polio, rickets and disability supported by DFID the UK Government’s overseas aid department, children and families in Ethiopia in collaboration with Save the Children NGO. Other projects have taken place in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Vietnam. In London young refugees are developing the Moving Lives project that creates digital stories as part of a community building programme. Other UK work has focused on disability and mental health.

The essential idea of photovoice is that disadvantage people document their subjective reality and explore their own issues. However, it appears that for some at least of the photovoice projects the initiative for, and the direction of the work, fits more to agency agendas than the expressed needs of local people. For example Moffitt and Vollman (2004) documenting community assets in Flint, and Wang (2004b) exploring required changes to health service priorities in San Francisco. Webb (2004) notes “it is all too easy for a photo-voice project to be co-opted to serve the agenda of people in power or those employed within the community development industry – however well-meaning – and thereby continue the disempowerment of the direct stakeholder group.”

How does photography work for community development?

Photography creates socially produced visual information. The reports from the photovoice projects suggest that people can feel empowered through the photography; that they are in control of a process that helps them explore what they feel and experience. They are taking action rather than reacting, or passively responding to actions of workers. Also important are the people, places, events and things not photographed. The Sheffield project (Booth and Booth) worked with mothers and noted the absence in the photographs of partners, the low profile of kin and the invisibility of supports. Work with young people can also identify places where they do not go and open up discussion about why this is so.

It is often suggested (for example Booth and Booth) that people may find it difficult to identify things to photograph and to visually explore community issues. The usual response is to either give people a lot of time to produce the photographs or just asking for a small number of pictures. This difficulty comes from cultural attitudes towards photography. Bourdieu (1996) pointed out peoples understanding of the use of photography is shaped by their class position with most working class people preferring to photograph their family and friends. Community is based upon social relationships, so starting with friends and moving out to explore wider issues is perhaps a sensible way of developing a photography based project.

Strack (2004) in reviewing a photovoice youth project in South Baltimore stresses the importance of ensuring that the scope of the project is set initially at the level of the participants confidence to ensure that everyone can fully participate in the project. Successfully producing photographs leads to improved confidence and self esteem which underpins further developmental activity. The authors comment that, “as youth gain individual skills-based competence, growing emphasis should be placed on group work, thoughtful discussion, and collective action in the world. Placing emphasis on their roles as researchers will help inspire a sense of responsibility and purpose in society that should contribute to increasing their social competency. Participating youth were empowered through their newfound awareness that their thoughts and opinions do matter.”

The information in the photographs can be seen as signifiers that can be decoded to create new locally produced knowledge. One way of understanding how we read signs is through the idea, which comes originally from feminist theory, of 'gaze' (Schroeder 1998). As Burgin (1982) writes "looking is not indifferent. There can never be any question of just looking." The concept of gaze explores subjective ways of viewing that usually reflect power relationships. Schroeder suggests that "to gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze." For example, at home we have a domestic gaze, on holiday we have a tourist gaze, men look at women with a male gaze, a woman looks at her child with a mothers gaze, a social worker looks at a client with a professional gaze.

The character of our gaze is dependant upon the nature of our consciousness and the effects of hegemony. Freire (1972) in writing about how people experience the world explores different states of consciousness. He suggests that *magical* consciousness is found in pre-industrial communities where the world is perceived to be unchanging having been created by god or godlike powers. In more developed societies we find *naïve* conscious where there is partial analysis of social conditions but the worldview is dominated by emotional reactions and fear of change. A *critical* level of consciousness provides a fuller analytical understanding of society and is the prerequisite for significant change to take place. The gaze we adopt influences how we interpret signs. In return the interpretation of the sign reinforces or changes our level of consciousness and understanding of hegemony and counter hegemony. Photography can create relevant decodable material and Freire gives us a process for critically learning from it.

In community development power issues never go away. For photography based work, just like all community development work, to effectively be an empowering approach local people should be inviting in external agencies, not the agencies setting the agenda. Many of the authors cited above see the involvement and support of external agencies as an important precondition to ensure the success of the project. Whilst this may be true for many projects it is based on an assumption of partnership and consensus working, which for some community issues may be inappropriate or

impossible. In other examples the photo-novella or photovoice rhetoric is used to give credibility to agencies that use local people for their own organisational ends.

Summary

Community development practice needs to continue to develop and experiment with new practice models that help it engage with people excluded from the mainstream of civic society. More use could be made of community arts in general and photography in particular. Community development needs to go beyond limited consensus and partnership approaches, ensure that the agenda for change is in the hands of the disadvantaged and build a critical vision of a better community. To do so it has to work on cultural agendas and face up to issues of power and hegemony. Photography can be an effective tool that enables community development to be practiced in this way. It sits comfortably within Freirian methodology and alongside PRA, Reflect and Training for Transformation approaches. It is also a way of working that lends itself to a wide variety of community settings and issues.

Like all methods there are pitfalls, limitations and failures. As Strack commented the “engagement in a photovoice program will not lead to a complete state of empowerment. Moreover, a program such as photovoice has the potential to create the negative outcome of raising hopes but failing to inform policy or rally public concern. Such a situation could leave participants feeling more hopeless and disempowered than when they started the program. It is imperative that concerted actions be taken to prevent this negative consequence.” However, if used as part of a Freirean process where the purpose of the project is to facilitate local people reflecting on their life situation, developing their vision of a better life that leads to action for change, then photographic approaches have much to offer for effective community development practice. Whether photographic approaches are useful in a particular context comes down to the ability of the worker to integrate it into effective practice.

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