

'Being canny': Exploring 'community' in the North East of England and acknowledging the need for community psychology

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To explore the meaning of 'community', 42 participants shared their creative perspectives during a community festival in the North East of England. Thematic analysis identified themes conceptualising 'community'; including connection, belonging, compassion, safety, sharing, inclusivity, and empowerment.

Introduction

WE NEED to do more with less; not just now, but permanently', stated our then Prime Minister during the period of largest cuts to public services to date (Krugman, 2012). Austerity has impacted diverse domains of society including physical health, social and occupational security, resulting in increased food bank and pay day loan reliance by society's most vulnerable (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Rowlingson et al., 2016). Moreover, risk factors for many common mental disorders are strongly associated with social inequalities (Allen et al., 2014). Fiscal

studies (IFS, 2012) show that cuts to welfare had the biggest impact on urban and deprived areas, including the North of England. Several years on services that once relied on government budgets have been forced to reorganise, reduce or close; with the loss of physical spaces such as community centres, libraries and children's centres (Blyth, 2013; Parnell & Widdop, 2015). As psychologists in the North East, we have witnessed the distress caused by austerity, alongside a reduction in resource, and politicisation of individual therapy (Gayle, 2015).

Community psychology, with values of

'inclusivity, social justice and improvement of health and wellbeing' (BPS, 2020) is a Division within the BPS that enables psychologists to explore and address distress beyond the therapy room and focus on social determinants. The Community Psychology division espouses a number of key aims, including working collectively with communities to promote the interests of disempowered groups; engaging communities in research, working to ensure voices are represented and included; and, communicating the impact of societal and political factors on psychosocial wellbeing (BPS, 2020). In practice however, such objectives can be challenging to achieve in our profession and it can be difficult to address this wider context, specifically within the known constraints of the NHS. Therefore, as psychologists, exploring how we can work with others to create community level intervention is more important than ever. There are many inspiring examples of communities and third sector organisations synergistically supporting one another, however, this is not easy to achieve without money, power or resource. Jason and Aase (2016) suggest that a systemic clinical-community psychology approach can address this need, which requires an understanding of the communities we are situated within and wish to support.

Therefore, given the impact of austerity on our society and the need to understand what community means to individuals, we felt it was timely to explore the meaning and impact of community, additionally exploring how psychology can play a role in supporting community action and involvement.

Method

Context

Psychologists for Social Change (PSC) is a national network of psychologists, academics, therapists, students, health care professionals, service users and carers who are interested in applying psychology to policy, political and community action (www.psychchange.org). PSC North East (PSCNE) is a volunteer led group specifically interested in the impact of austerity on communities in the North

East. PSCNE has developed links with local organisations to support the development of activist projects, advocating for local causes, and communities working in Newcastle and surrounding areas.

Star and Shadow are a volunteer led cooperative operating within the Shieldfield area of Newcastle. They provide a space for members of the community to attend social or community events and training.

PSCNE, together with Star and Shadow, organised a community festival in autumn 2019, which brought community organisations together with live music, arts and wellbeing activities to the public. The event was free to attend for all and an estimated 200+ people attended the event.

Sample

Opportunistic sampling was used to invite attendees to engage with an interactive art space. Since the space was interactive, full demographic data was not collected.

Procedure

Attendees were verbally informed of the aim of the project: 'creating a shared understanding of what community means to individuals in Newcastle', and the intended analysis and planned dissemination of their contributions. Those opting to participate were given the opportunity to write or draw their responses to the question 'what does community mean to you?' on a piece of paper and attach it to a wall to create a shared piece of art.

Data analysis

Responses were analysed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach. Two researchers conducted the initial analysis, which involved coding responses for key features. When repeated patterns were seen to emerge, themes were generated. A third, and independent, researcher completed the same process. Although initially the theme names differed between researchers, the data were revisited and themes were agreed upon and refined using participant-focused language.

Results

Forty-two people, aged between 8–86 years participated. Participants shared their thoughts via a number of modalities: drawing, writing, using specific colours. Additionally there were some multi-lingual responses shared.

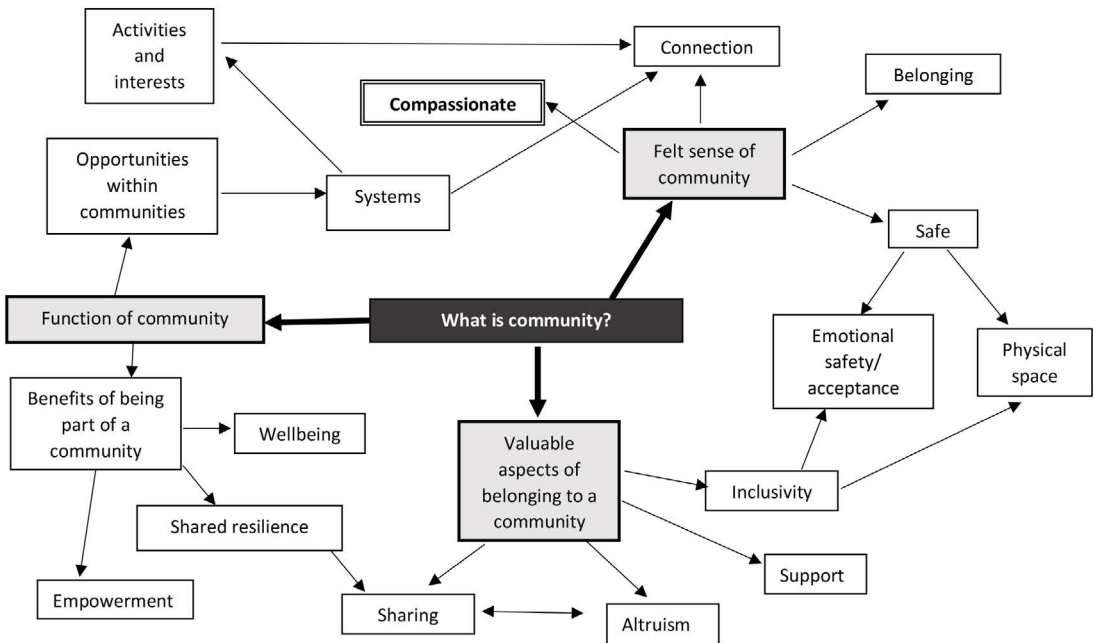
Three superordinate themes were identified, namely 'How community feels', 'What community does', and 'What people value about community', each with subordinate themes

(see Table 1). Relationships between themes and subthemes emerged during analysis; for example, the subtheme 'physical space' featured in the shared understanding of community creating a feeling of safety, however, also linked to the subtheme inclusivity, with the acknowledgement that 'safe spaces' are required for communities to be diverse and inclusive (see Figure 1 for a thematic map detailing relationships between themes).

Table 1: Superordinate and subordinate themes

Theme	How 'community' feels (Felt sense of being part of a community)	What 'community' does (The function of community)	What people value about 'community' (Valuable aspects of being part of a community)
Sub-themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection • Belonging • Compassionate • Safe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment • Wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social opportunity - Shared resilience • Systems • Activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing • Altruism • Support • Inclusivity

Figure 1: Thematic map: what is community?



How community feels

This initial theme encompassed how community made participants feel; detailing beliefs about the felt sense that community brings.

Connection

As exemplified by statements, for many participants, community offered a sense of 'connection' to others, whether that is physically 'gathering together' or a felt sense of 'Connecting with others', 'Connecting with lots of people', or 'Feeling part of something – feeling connected to people and places'.

Belonging

Community was also described in terms of belonging to a group and a feeling of togetherness; 'community is feeling like I actually belong somewhere'. Participants described situations where without community, they may otherwise have felt isolated:

'A place to come for a cuppa and chat when I've not seen anyone for a week'.

Safety

The community environment is a valued safe place for participants. One young person's perspective of feeling safe in their community involved a drawing of a shark next to a group of people, with a teddy bear situated in the corner alongside text reading: 'Bear is always there'. Moreover, participants felt that communities provide 'a safe space' to express aspects of one's identity: 'feeling safe enough to be yourself'.

Compassionate

'Compassion' was the most frequently featured word within the responses, and related to further descriptions of 'being human' is the essence of community and that 'sharing what we have, especially compassion' is essential. Touchingly, one participant used the North East phrase 'being canny' which captures kindness and compassion locally.

What community does

Responses also demonstrated an action oriented view of community, describing the function of communities.

Empowerment

The data also referenced 'self-generated culture' and 'working for something important', with communities 'bringing out the best in people'. Additionally participants indicated a resilience within communities, for example, shared attitudes and action:

'to refuse to be ground down'.

'working towards a cause'.

Participants referred to an idea of power regarding 'a place that matters'.

Wellbeing

This sub-theme emerged as participants described feeling 'happier together' when resource and skills are shared, with further reference to the 'social responsibility' of community in 'taking the emotions out of the individual and acknowledging others' wellbeing' and 'looking after one another and where we live'.

Systems

Participants referred to the context of their community experience with description of various 'systems', some personal, others formal environments, showing the variety of settings that can make up a sense of community. Examples included: 'school', 'healthcare professionals', 'GPs', 'friends', 'neighbours', 'local foodbank', 'the pub', 'fans in the stalls at the match', and 'people on the bus'.

Activity

A recurring theme in participants' responses included the sense that community is about engaging in or the opportunity for 'activity', for example, 'eating food', 'volunteering', 'street play', 'talking' and 'being social'. One participant's moving example of engagement in activity involved having somewhere – a physical space – to come to in an otherwise isolated existence:

'...it has got me out of the flat for the first time in 3 weeks'.

What people value about 'community'

This theme captured the range of factors offered by the communities to which participants belong highlighting how important communities are to people's social, psychological and physical health.

Sharing

'Helping each other' and sharing resources, skills and time were considered pertinent to participants' perception of community. Participants also valued how community afforded the sharing of special interests and passion, or the working towards a shared goal.

'Sharing their stories and ideas for the benefit of others'.

Altruism

Participants valued how people in communities look out for one another, and described the importance of kindness, helping and 'working together to bring the best out in us all'.

'when a neighbour says anytime you need help, or just a cup of tea, and you know they actually mean it'.

'making time sacrifices to be there for people... even when there's no financial reward you get involved and give time'.

Support

The support offered by belonging to a community held notable value, with people 'looking out for each other', with a particularly illustrative example of community providing support and offering a sense of accountability:

'it's the lads at the pub that ask about me if I don't show up'

Inclusivity

Participants' responses described valuing the feeling of inclusion within a community.

People valued 'welcoming new folk' into the community, giving a degree of acceptance, with an overarching sense of 'everyone matters'. This also came with an acknowledgement of there being power in diversity; with different views, beliefs, religions, genders, sexualities, ages and races all being mentioned within responses.

'Colourful' was used as a descriptor of community by one participant, with many participants drawing their representations of diversity: including individuals in wheelchairs or with walking aids, those with different colour skin, depictions of same-sex couples holding hands, symbols depicting gender transitioning, fluidity or neutrality, different body shapes, varying hair colours, piercings and tattoos, and LGBTQ+ flags and rainbows. Some drawings featured houses and buildings (churches, community centres, pubs and schools), elements of nature (trees, oceans and the Earth) and pets. This was also reflected in the following quotes:

'making sure we fight for each other; for equality for all'.

'loving everyone the same, never-mind the differences'.

Discussion

Summary of findings

Using data collected from an opportunistic sample at a community festival, this paper describes a thematic exploration of 'what community means' to people. Three superordinate themes emerged focusing on: how community feels, what community does and what people value about community. Subordinate themes demonstrate that community fosters feelings of connection, belonging and compassion; it helps to empower, create social opportunity, create safety, as well as harnessing wellbeing and resilience. Individuals in the current study valued sharing, altruism, support and the inclusive nature of community.

Many of the subordinate themes emanating from the current research map closely on to the model of 'community' proposed by

McMillan and Chavis (1986) who highlighted: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection as essential elements. This would suggest constancy in that similar indicators of community are consistently important over time. Interestingly, a number of themes emanating from the current study highlight aspects relevant to a 'sense of community' which are not included in the McMillan and Chavis model; including the explicit emphasis placed on diversity as well as physical space. With increasing emphasis on competition and reduction in government funding following years of austerity, physical spaces providing inclusion and safety have suffered (e.g. libraries, activity centres, day centres). One possibility is that this theme emerged as important in the current study due to the loss of such physical spaces over time, whereas, in 1986 these spaces would likely have been more readily available. Furthermore, in 1986 diversity did not receive the same currency as it does today.

Implications

The notion that 'individual psychotherapy is available to a small number only, no mass disorder has ever been eliminated by treating one person at a time' (Albee, 1999, p.133) captures the limitations of individualised and reactive psychological interventions that are predominantly available. While many advocate the broadening engagement of psychologists towards community psychology approaches of prevention and service delivery (Harper, 2016), many psychologists can feel deskilled or overwhelmed when considering impacting on whole communities. However, the current study offers hope that community doesn't necessarily need to feel 'big', and engaging in creative spaces (e.g. 'the football stalls') to empower a feeling of belonging can indirectly influence resilience and wellbeing. Indeed, often the psychologist's skill is not necessarily in the creation of a community, but in supporting, evidencing and fostering engagement in communities that already exist. For example, the community festival where the data was collected brought together

a local cooperative, mental health organisations and created space for a multitude of existing organisations including: food banks, legal advocacy, physical health, environment groups. Psychology's role here was creating psychological reflective and therapeutic space and facilitating connection, which maps on to the themes which emerged, and is possibly a way of evolving our profession in current times.

Keeping our then Prime Minister's stark warning in mind: 'we need to do more with less; not just now, but permanently', the data presented here speaks to the consequences of austerity but also provides hope and solutions. Alongside advocating and supporting social policy, clinical psychology is positioned with the power and skills to intervene on a community level, with Jason and Aase (2016) describing a systemic approach whereby psychologists attempt to expand the reach of mental health services through training and supervising community members, advocating for communities and consulting with stake holders in the community to incur change. Building on these recommendations, the emergence of integral themes of values, compassion and acceptance in the present study suggest the utility of compassion focused approaches, since belonging to supportive and inclusive groups appears to be therapeutic in its own right. Clinical psychologists are highly skilled in delivering group based interventions, and such modalities are increasingly being rolled out, which could prove incredibly beneficial within community settings alongside service users and agencies who understand the landscape of the space and group. Moreover, the sharing of resources, time and skills emerged in the data as an important feature of community, in turn improving wellbeing and resilience. With this in mind, linking psychologists with communities could facilitate this 'shared action', creating ripple effects throughout groups and community settings.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the current study is that the data was collected at a 'Community

Festival', thus it is likely that those in attendance held an interest and actively engaged in a sense of community. There are many people who may feel isolated or unable to engage in or access a sense of community, which may be multifactorial (age, geography, physical health, mental health), and as such are harder to reach. Ensuring such voices are captured will be essential for future research in this area.

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