

## What knowledge do I currently use to tackle social exclusion as health visitor and where do the problems lie?

Paper for discussion with health visitor colleagues on February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005  
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The Department of Health challenge to community workers is to refocus our activity on tackling social exclusion (DH, 1999; DfEE, 1999; DH, 2004). This seems to be dependent on our knowing what we do already and what would better improve the life chances of marginalised people who experience the greatest burden from living with disadvantages. My belief is that what is effective in community practice with this comparatively small but challenging section of the population is under explained or examined by those of us who do it. It is hard to begin understanding what it is that we don't know already and what we need to know to make the work more effective without critically exploring the practice knowledge we bring to what we do. In this paper I will review the knowledge I believe that I bring to my health visiting practice and clarify the contradictions I need to address.

My intention in doing this is to find a way of sharing the personal theories I arrived at in my previous research with colleagues and to ask for help extending my effectiveness and understanding. In return, I hope colleagues will find use in this discussion for their own professional and personal development. I do not expect to be creating a text that offers a template of good practice for others to follow but a means to open up discussions that may be worthwhile. I also realise the limitations of a short text that may appear little more than a list of values and insights taken out of the practice experiences from which they emerged.

### What do I claim to know already?

In my previous research (Pound, 2003) I looked at multiple aspects of my professional knowledge and how my effectiveness is influenced by my personal knowledge. By the time I had finished, after seven years, it was hard to remember what I didn't know before hand. I don't want to retrace that journey but instead distil a summary of the personal theories I believe now inform the way I approach my work with people living with the most intractable socially excluding difficulties. Of course the real contradictions arise when these theories do not fit in some practical situations and seem at odds with reality. My hope is that in identifying the core theories I will begin to identify why contradictions arise and I can ask colleagues and the families I visit to help me solve them so I can become more useful.

A full description of how these insights emerged can be found in the full transcript of my thesis at [www.actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net) in the Thesis Section and summarised in Chapter Eight. Reading Chapter Eight enabled me to create a list the insights and some of the contradictions that continue to be important to me in understanding and explaining what I do and where the problems lie. Values I now use as standards for judging my practice are in italics and the numbers refer to pages in the thesis.

### My learning:

- '*Alongsideness*' is an umbrella explanation of how I try to be with people. It encompasses many of the other values and insights listed here.
- I discovered the usefulness of *alongsideness* values for realising human rights.
- I learnt to *trust* people's creativity and ability to change (192). I realised most parents want the best for their children.
- Individual human emotional need to experience our personal significance in the world colours our behaviour.
- The *courage to be imperfect*
- In collaborative relationships I reduce power inherent in my professional relationships. The climate is then more reciprocal and responsive to all our needs
- *Valuing people* and *respect*. This is about the inherent worth of humanness.
- *Connection* with people and the life affirming spark of *humour* enables useful communication (190,193).
- We all live in an endless *process of becoming* (194)
- We are social beings. The wellbeing of one person is dependent on the wellbeing of others (194). Parents' empathy for children is enhanced by their awareness of their own needs.

- Cultural norms and personal history play a big part in the values and beliefs we bring to our work (196).
- I need to *accept differences* in other people's beliefs. Cultural and personal norms are the bedrock of how we understand the world and others may feel excluded from the 'world' we present.
- Listening with a real desire to understand and learn from the other.
- Personal *autonomy*: Recognising I work well when I am self directed and see good sense in what I am doing clarifies the importance of fostering self reliance and being in control for others.
- *Being there* for people - responsive to the moment
- *Engagement* and investing myself in the relationship (195)
- *Encouragement* over fault finding for stimulating change (192). I now believe in building on positive attributes rather than searching for faults. I recognise criticism and punishment makes people defensive and less likely to hear new ideas.
- Mirrored relationships. I am more likely to be influential if I practise what I preach
- *Containment*. Some people just need to be held until they recover enough to be able to take charge of themselves again(194)
- *Responsive responsibility* is about my needing to also take responsibility for acting on things that may be harmful, particularly for children or people who are more vulnerable.
- My learning is through nuances of perspective rather than giant leaps of discover (194)
- I don't always know what I don't know or even that I don't know it!
- There is a unity of purpose in many of my actions because they are motivated by my beliefs and values
- I also came to insights about how I create knowledge that informs my practice and what that means for evidence-based practice.

#### Contradictions:

- How do I balance being child-centred with being parent -centred? Can children always wait for their parents to grow up?(194, 195)
- How do I recognise and support personal development in which people find their own questions and answers when sometimes they just they want to be told? (193)
- How do I balance my alongside engagement with families with my role in professional surveillance and intervention?
- How do I balance the importance I place in the equality of people's worth while following professional rules that seem to exclude some people?(195)
- How do I reconcile my alongside approach to identifying client need with the current priority to 'profile' populations and use 'vulnerability' tools to identify health needs?
- How do I create a dialogue with people whose histories are different from my own so I can learn what I need to know to be more widely useful?
- What can we do about the gap between the knowledge we now have about the emotional needs of children and the criteria for assessing children at risk or in need? A huge gulf of unmet need is obvious. (196)
- What can we do to prioritise primary prevention when restorative therapy is more likely to yield the recognisable outcomes required by service evaluators? (196)
- How can I help myself and others learn to balance personal freedom with individual responsibility?
- How can I /we reduce theory-practice gaps between what we feel life should be like with the reality of living democratic relationships - this is the gap between intentions and reality? (198)

I now believe that newly acquired 'how to' knowledge is more likely to be embodied and influence my practice if it fits with the values and beliefs I already hold.

I welcome any comments about how I can make this short paper more useful for stimulating debate.