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Building partnerships between psychology and the voluntary sector

Gareth Hagger-Johnson*, Craig Hutchison, Jim McManus, Meg Barker

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Psychologists should consider their relationship with the voluntary and community sectors (VCS). Here, we outline the potential returns for sectors when collaborating, and the potential consequences of making assumptions about the role of psychology in this process. Our insights are based partly on two one-day 'Building Partnerships' events supported by the BPS, where BPS Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section and VCS representatives met (Sheppard & Hegarty, 2004). The aim of both days was to 'give psychology away', a strategy of public engagement in psychology advocated by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and by several individual commentators (Lindsay, 1995; Peel & McQuade, 2002; MacKay, 2001). Our recommendations have relevance to psychologists who work with the VCS in other fields.

Recent government policy has identified the VCS as a core component of delivering high quality public services to those who need them (Home Office, 2004a). The Home Office (2004b) is investing an additional £125 million in the VCS between 2005 and 2006. Three of these policies are particularly relevant to psychology:

1. *Health.* The VCS is instrumental in delivering sustainable improvements in health and addressing health inequalities (Department of Health, 2003)
2. *Sustainable communities.* The VCS contributes to the building of communities that are safe, healthy, pleasant and viable in civil life (ODPM, 2003).
3. *Community safety.* The VCS delivers 'grassroots' projects and initiatives, in recent crime reduction policy, for example (Burnley, 2004; Levi & Maguire, 2004).

VCS agencies offer diverse services such as victim support, housing and homelessness advice, health care, counselling and legal information. It is recognised generally that the VCS is particularly well positioned to deliver services for populations who are marginalized or who experience discrimination in generic or statutory services. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) voluntary sector is particularly well established (due in part to 'grassroots' responses to the HIV epidemic) and includes HIV prevention workers, telephone helpline operators, community workers, outreach workers and counsellors: several of which attended the Building Partnerships meetings (Peel & McQuade, 2002; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997). Psychologists are equally diverse, and their roles include research, counselling, psychological testing and assessment.

The Building Partnerships events were formed out of the BPS initiatives to 'bring psychology to society' and 'give psychology away'. It became apparent that this concept was problematic. VCS delegates joked, 'how long will they be giving it away for' and 'can we give it back if don't want it?' which indicated that the approach, in certain contexts, can be perceived as patronizing. A one-directional

model in which psychological knowledge is 'transferred' to the VCS restricts the potential for psychologists to learn from their VCS partners. Giving psychology away to the VCS also has an interesting parallel to a term developed in the public understanding of science literature: the *deficit model*. In the deficit model, the public are viewed as passive recipients of scientific information, and the purpose of giving science away is to educate and inform the public to address their deficits in knowledge. The deficit model has attracted a number of critics (Kerr *et al.*, 1998; Durant *et al.*, 1996) who disagree with how the public are constructed as 'given to' and 'deficient'. Many groups make up the public, and knowledge is more than a matter of technical detail. The public do not require accurate technical and methodological understanding of science in order to express opinions or feelings about its enterprise (Kerr *et al.*, 1998).

An alternative model for building relationships between science and society is to characterize science as a 'stock of knowledge' which the public and scientists can contribute to and draw from (Kerr *et al.*, 1998). This model might also apply to the relationship between psychology and the VCS. The role of VCS agencies is more than gate-keeping access to research participants. In this reciprocal model (Peel & McQuade, 2002) of giving psychology away, both the VCS and psychologists can draw from, and contribute to, a store of psychological knowledge. Psychologists can learn from the VCS, who provide access to hard-to-reach groups, experience in providing services to the public, local knowledge, and other areas of expertise. A dialogue between psychology and the VCS can also clarify what each considers valid or useful knowledge. Ultimately, the VCS uptake of psychology will depend on its perceived *relevance* (Kerr *et al.*, 1998). We noted that the VCS tends to be selective about which research to refer to. Research with 'useful' findings is used, but studies that do not support the VCS agency's agenda are ignored – a phenomenon we term the 'pick and mix problem'. Lack of uptake of psychology by the VCS might be an active process/choice. Agencies may have a disinclination to become involved with particular sorts of psychological knowledge (Durant *et al.*, 1996: 246). It may prove informative to investigate negative responses to, not just uptake of, psychology. Understanding *how* the VCS can 'facilitate and utilize' (Kerr *et al.*, 1998) psychology and its applied benefits will benefit both sectors.

A practical concern raised during the meetings was the intelligibility of psychology, or understanding of the research and evaluation processes used by psychologists. A source of tension mentioned several times by some VCS delegates was that psychology research was incomprehensible (e.g. a paper was difficult to read) or inaccessible (e.g. the journal was expensive or unavailable). Commentators from other disciplines have proposed a process of 'extended peer review' where research is peer reviewed twice: once for professional journals, and a simplified version for the public. We noted the popularity of the BPS Research Digest Service, where 'snippets' of research are explained in lay terms, and welcome attempts to develop this resource further. Psychologists can use their work to enhance their profile among community agencies, who might find the work useful, but only if they present it in an accessible format. There has sometimes been a tendency for psychologists to write for a purely academic audience, which may consequently mean that the knowledge developed never finds its way into everyday VCS practice. Clearly, it is important that psychologists communicate their research to the VCS in an accessible form, ideally with concrete recommendations. When working with the

VCS, it is equally important that psychologists ask the VCS which ‘answers’ are sought.

We were reminded at the meetings that many VCS organisations have conducted research in their field of interest, driven partly by increasing pressure of VCS staff to justify their work with an evidence base, particularly when funding is restricted. Small-scale evaluations, often without statistical/analytical training, are requested with comparatively short timescales. Taking the LGBT voluntary sector as an example, research has been conducted by the VCS because psychology was seen to be silent or neglecting topics of concern: homophobia, bullying and violence, mental health, lesbian and gay parenting and sexual risk-taking. However, much of this research has never been published in academic journals and is therefore referred to as ‘grey literature’ (Cordes, 2004). Grey literature is information produced in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing i.e. where publishing is not the primary activity. In some disciplines, a substantial proportion of references in journal articles are to grey articles (e.g. Cordes, 2004). Grey is perhaps an unfortunate word, because VCS research is often high quality and can be used by psychologists. In the Danish context, this activity has been formalized because VCS agencies participate in public sector management and a body called the ‘Charities Evaluation Service’ exists to support charities in designing research. The shift towards a more flexible public sector in the U.K. means that psychologists here may soon be required to work with the ‘models and principles’ of other sectors (Jorgensen, 1999).

At our Building Partnerships meetings, VCS delegates provides some initial guidelines for a model of good practice, summarized in Box 1. One complaint was that certain groups of service users are being over-researched, for example, gay men recruited into HIV prevention studies. Staff also reported a feeling of obligation to participate in psychology research, and complaints of ‘hit and run’ research or students ‘requesting 200 service users to complete a questionnaire and then disappearing’. One practical suggestion which the Lesbian & Gay Section have acted upon, is the design and publishing of a psychology-VCS database which would collate research from both sectors, highlight the existence of gaps or over-researched areas, and where individuals’ expertise can be found. This resource will be online and searchable. Projects such as these are examples of the term *capacity building*, by which professions can engage with the VCS and help them respond to the needs of the communities they serve (Harrow, 2001). However, developing this resource is not motivated entirely by altruism - psychologists at both Building Partnerships meetings were clear to acknowledge that the database will benefit their work by helping them find research participants.

Concluding the first meeting, we stressed that good research would involve consultation, and conclude with a presentation of the findings to an organization that assisted in the research process. Bringing psychology to the VCS, and to society, will help increase ‘psychological literacy’, but should be accompanied by psychologists’ collaborating with the VCS (cf. MacIntyre, 1995). This initiative might usefully be described as *sharing* psychology with the VCS, and with society.

Box 1

Guidelines offered by VCS delegates to psychologists

DON'T

View the community/voluntary sector as a convenient way of getting access to respondents/participants

Send bundles of questionnaires and expect busy staff to distribute them for you

Send out questionnaires without first checking the appropriateness and clarity of your questions (e.g. do not use the word 'homosexual' and expect gay men to respond with valid answers)

Expect community/voluntary organizations to provide immediate and unlimited access to service-users. You will need to earn trust, and may have to work with organizations to establish appropriate procedures for contact with service-users

Be surprised if we ask you to sit on a committee or work for us after the research has finished, we need all the help we can get

Dismiss small scale research projects which have been conducted by the voluntary sector because they are not as well designed as academic research

DO

View community/voluntary groups as colleagues, rather than as a resource

Enter into discussion with community/voluntary groups about what research might be useful or helpful in their field

Enter into a dialogue with VCS before designing the questionnaire. They will be able to provide psychologists with advice on terminology, the relevance of specific questions, and areas which may be of particular interest to research with their community/service-users. Turning up with pre-designed questionnaires won't allow you to get feedback on the relevance and appropriateness of your research questions.

Use the knowledge and experience of community/voluntary groups about appropriate ways of contacting potential respondents/participants

Let community/voluntary know the results of your research. Be prepared to present and discuss your findings. Hit and run research does not go down well!

Web sites

Grey Literature

<http://www.greynet.org>

Charities Evaluation Service

<http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/>

Consortium of lesbian, gay & bisexual voluntary & community organizations

<http://fp.lgbconsortium.plus.com/>

Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section

<http://bps.org.uk/sub-syst/lesgay/index.cfm>

Not for profit organization assessment tool

<http://www.tmcenter.org/assessment/toolintro.html>

Non-Profit Centre

<http://www.tmncentre.org/>

They have a library of resources for non-profit agencies free to use.

Web of Knowledge

<http://wok.mimas.ac.uk/>

Offers discounts for charities

RefViz

<http://www.refviz.com/>

Visually displays under- and over-researched areas

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