

Dear Reader

MORE CHANGE – LESS STABILITY ? CHALLENGES REMAIN – John Diamond (Chair of ARVAC)

We are 12 months from the next General Election and whilst predicting its outcome is probably unwise we can be sure that the change and instability within and across the Sector will remain. We are having to navigate our way through very difficult times. We know that the cuts across the public sector are set to continue and we know too that they are likely to part of the context within which people have to work beyond 2020. The scale of change across the public sector is having a direct impact on the VCS and we know that this process of disruption and uncertainty is likely to remain. The scale of the disruption is one which is having a profound impact on what we do , what we can do and the consequences for individuals and families and communities who rely on the VCS are huge.

Within ARVAC we have tried to plan our activities so that we can be more supportive (within our limited means) to those who work in the Sector on a paid or unpaid basis. It seems to us that an important part of what we can do is to provide a 'home' both for those who are directly involved in working with practitioners and participants as they make

Inside this issue:

Communication and Collaboration: The development of a social care partnership network.	3
MMU Bearing Witness Research Update	5
Book review	7
Duncan Scott reviews Colin	
Rochesters book, 'Rediscovering Voluntary Action	
ARVAC 2014	13
Annual Lecture	
Registration details	
About ARVAC	14
Our Aims and Values	

sense of the complex policy and practice world they are living and working in. The contributions from Victoria Morris and Katy Goldstraw in this issue are really good examples of this. Both Victoria and Katy are reporting on their research projects and both rely on the active engagement of participants and users. This direct relationship between those who research and those who experience the world as it is forms part of the rationale of ARVAC. As part of our commitment to thinking, reflecting and learning we encourage researchers to see themselves as having a direct responsibility to share their findings and to listen to their constituency of users.

At the end of April ARVAC together with the Voluntary Sector Studies Network and Greater Manchester Council for Voluntary Organisations will be holding a one day event for those who are researching in and with the voluntary sector. We hope that the next issue of the Bulletin will carry a report of that day.

The other role we have is to contribute to that process of learning from the past or learning from elsewhere. Holding onto the 'memories' of the Sector in

a time of change can be essential if we are to learn from the past in order to act in the present.

Duncan Scott's review of a new book by a leading member of ARVAC (Colin Rochester) is part of this process. I strongly recommend both the review and the book. And, finally, our Annual Public Lecture this year on May 29 in London is to be given by Professor Jenny Pearce from the University of Bradford. She is talking about learning from outside the UK the implications and possibilities of neighbourhood activism. We hope that many of you will join us for this free event.

Institutional memories, learning from the past to shape the present and promoting the principles of shared or joint enquiry are ways to cope with the changing context we are working in.

Communication and collaboration: The Development of a Social Care Partnership Network

Victoria Morris- Manchester Metropolitan University

In the last bulletin, the editor John Diamond wrote about ARVAC's hope to draw upon the skills and resources of universities and other large organisations, to support smaller VCS organisations. In response to this, I would like to share what I believe is an exemplar of such practice.

As Placement Development Co-ordinator for the BA (Hons) Social Care at Manchester Metropolitan University, I secure placement opportunities for students undertaking this degree. It is my responsibility to nurture a wholesome working relationship with our community social care providers. Their representatives are invited to join us as placement partners so that we can benefit from each other's expertise and knowledge. It is a simple yet effective formula, which provides mutual gain.

Students going out into the community for their placements can learn so much from those already in practice. These opportunities afford them invaluable, unique experiences of the realities of social care provision currently. But the transfer works both ways. Practitioners frequently tell me that

having the input of the academically minded enthusiastic students gives them much 'food for thought' in relation to their service delivery.

This theme of reciprocity and exchange between placement providers and the department of social care became the foundation stone for the inception of a unique network in May 2013.

Meetings of the **Social Care Partnership Network** provide a platform to invite our partners to come together with us at the University and discuss how we can collaborate and innovate together. Acknowledging that we can learn so much from each other, since our initial meeting, we have begun to explore ideas such as collaborative funding bids and joint research projects. We also discuss how we can work together to improve students' employability within this growing field.

Since the inaugural meeting, we have held a network event every quarter, with a mixed programme of social and academic events. These have included

FREE Equality and Diversity Training, Student / Employer Meet and Greet Fair and an inspirational workshop by a lead researcher entitled 'Values and what makes for quality care'.

Regardless of the activity, the sole purpose remains the same- to share our knowledge and expertise for our mutual benefit and for the benefit of the future social care workforce.

The **Social Care Advisory Panel** evolved out of the larger network. Its purpose is to look in more detail at how we at the university can collaborate with partners individually and how they in turn can work more closely with us in relation to informing curriculum development. This advisory panel meets monthly and so far, we have had two extremely productive meetings. The focus is very much on reciprocity and give and take.

Issues

Inevitably, although extremely successful a couple of issues have arisen:

Our network comprises of a diverse representation of social care providers. Whilst this no doubt adds richness to the make-up of the group it also poses a challenge.

To some extent, it is a matter of trial and error when trying to provide events, which will appeal to the majority. Thus, the var-

ied programme of activities, some more lighthearted than others.

The capacity of our partner organisations means that their commitment to attend is also difficult to guarantee. Many of them are SMEs and they simply do not have the staff to release for the sessions, even though paradoxically if they could, their organisation would no doubt benefit from the knowledge gained.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that even though a very simple formula, this project has produced a huge amount of mutual gain and knowledge exchange thus far.

In these testing times, demonstrating our commitment to our third sector partners' well-being and sustainability through a variety of means has been most welcome.

They have seen that the MMU department of Social Care does not want to be accused of sitting in an Ivory tower. That actually what we want is to be involved at the very heart of their organisations. Whether through student placement, assistance with research and training, joint applications for funding or just by providing them with a relaxed space for them to congregate and swap their experiences and knowledge.

MMU Bearing Witness Research Update

Katy Goldstraw

The first of what I hope to be a series of participatory workshops took place last Wednesday (26th February 14). It was attended by a really inspiring and diverse range of VCS organisations and several MMU academics interested in Adult Social Care.

The workshop commenced with an introduction from PhD student, Katy Goldstraw. I welcomed participants and explained **the desire to bear witness to the effects of austerity on adult social care organisations**. I explained my decade of experience working within the VCS as a carer, volunteer and volunteer manager and my academic background in poverty reduction. I very much **wish the research to be participatory and co-produced knowledge with the sector**. I introduced **livelihoods as a form of analysis** – an approach initially used in international development but very relevant to a UK context. **Livelihoods takes a holistic approach to assets** examining (in this case an organisation's but more

usually a household's) capitals. There are five capitals considered; financial, human (education / health), physical (infrastructure), social & natural (environmental). **I hope to use Livelihoods analysis to research with organisations the effects of austerity on organisational strategy.**

I ran through the benefits that I can offer if an organisation wishes to join the research project;

- exclusive access to my research blog,
- bespoke organisational research updates
- networking opportunities within the sector and with MMU.

In return for engaging in my research I would like to attend staff meetings as an observer and conduct semi structured interviews (max 1 hour per staff member) with key staff members. These can be arranged at mutually convenient times. All information will be anonymised and

kept confidential in accordance with MMU's Ethics policy.

Dr Sue Baines then gave a fifteen minute lecture on the history of Adult Social Care, Austerity, Localism and poverty. The floor was then opened to organisations who were asked 'what are the major themes' affecting VCS organisations at present. Their feedback was impassioned, innovative and engaged. The **research questions** identified during this session were around **funding, accountability and responsibility for resources and services, poverty, policy challenges , globalisation and VCS identity.**

Dr Jenny Fisher then gave a fifteen minute talk on spaces and places of care, using the metaphor of weaving to examine formal and informal adult social care themes.

The VCS workshop groups were then asked to give initial feedback on research questions and consider the research themes in more detail. Themes of Poverty and Globalisation were given a lot of reflection as was the role of the VCS, its identity and how it should engage with policy. Funding was of course another primary issue.

Organisations were then thanked for their time and invited to join the research project.

Organisations that joined the project will remain confidential however they are a representative mix of small / below the radar organisations, medium sized Greater Manchester Organisations and Large infrastructure organisations.

To find out more or to contact the researcher please e-mail k.goldstraw@mmu.ac.uk

Book Review: Duncan Scott

Rediscovering Voluntary Action: The Beat of a Different Drum, Colin Rochester (2013), London, Palgrave Macmillan, 256pp, paperback. £19.99.

This is an ambitious and accessible book about some of the most important challenges facing contemporary voluntary workers, volunteers, policy makers, and academic commentators. Its sixteen chapters are laid out in bite-sized chunks, well-supported by thirteen pages of references and twenty-one pages of index.

The very first line signals a promising intention. The author's considerable experience is to be at the core of the book. This is an experience containing a relatively unique combination of voluntary work and Higher Education teaching. Inevitably, there are tensions and contradictions, of which a recurrent one is the difficult balance between academic norms, inherent in the production of books like this, and the use of so-called 'practical experience'. To borrow from a much-used Latin term, my sense is that published texts often contain too much 'Curriculum' and not enough 'Vitae'. These terms are a shorthand for an old argument with continuing contemporary relevance. On the one hand, there are

formal institutions widely acknowledged to be the appropriate place for knowledge gathering, digestion and dissemination. ('Curriculum' refers to their programmes of learning and training). On the other hand, critics of the institutions point to the fact that most people, most of the time, live in non-formal social worlds-at home, in the neighbourhood, in friendship networks and associations. Their life ('Vitae') is a crucial influence in shaping how they make sense of and act in the world. Writers about formal and non-formal worlds need to constantly seek a balance between them. For example, in certain subjects or inter-disciplinary areas it may be positively helpful to augment the curriculum with structured and unstructured slices of 'Vitae'. We often call such arrangements 'Fieldwork Placements' or 'Practical Experience'. How, therefore, we make sense of voluntary and community action will depend to a large extent on the ways in which social or life knowledge is integrated with the valuable concepts and theories contained

in the thirteen pages of references in this book.

The emphasis on the academy emerges early. We are informed that better theories can “---challenge or slow down the way in which the role and behaviour of voluntary organisations have been changing.” (p.6). As a wizened pensioner, with a similar C.V. to the author, I remain more sceptical about such claims. Don't throw theorising out of the window. Just heed the warning of the late Stuart Hall that intellectual work must struggle with the reality that it changes little. To forget that will mean that “---theory has let you off the hook.” (Quoted by Stuart Jeffries, 2014).

A second tension relates to the primary critical theme in the book. We are offered a plausible analysis of the role and performance of larger, more formal, voluntary organisations. When the focus shifts to smaller, non-formal, associations and community groups it is less evident that a similar critique has been developed. Dare we forget the ways in which so many of these agencies can reinforce inequality through their resistance to change both in the town and country, in faith-based places and secular ones?

One book cannot cover all the ground. Nevertheless, this one does an admirable amount of `re-discovering` about:

- The historical contexts of contemporary thinking (chapters 1-4)
- The pressures and influences shaping policy and practice (chapters 5-8)
- Alternative perspectives on current explanatory patterns -the author prefers `paradigms-(chapters 9-13)
- Some implications for a re-organised approach to understanding voluntary action (chapters 14-16)

An intriguing early theme is that of `Invention`. This borrows from an article by a man (and Diana Leat) who annoys compilers of Bibliographies by insisting that his surname should be a number: hence their useful publication appears as the very first entry rather than at `Six` or should it be `6`? In essence it is suggested that the very concepts of voluntary **sector** and **work** mask rather than inform our understanding. In short, they act as `hegemonic` influences, helping to create the illusion that sector and work are as solid in reality as we may think. Hegemony-the power of taken-for-granted ideas, useful to some interests

in society to the detriment of others, deserves a stronger place in voluntary sector studies. It is, therefore, worth more room in this book, and a place in the index.

The 'Invention' thesis raises a crucial explanatory dilemma i.e. how to assemble convincing evidence about the influence of the inventors, even though their territory or sphere of immediate influence is largely confined to between 22% and 2% of the voluntary world (dependent on which fraction is chosen). A tiny number of metropolitan elites in national voluntary organisations are deemed to have evolved links with a few hundred academics, consultants, trainers and public sector specialists. As a result, the positive potential of voluntary and community action has at best been hindered and at worst deflected, suffocated, incorporated. From my provincial vantage point, I am sympathetic to such a perspective. The strength of the book's case prompts a re-examination of my own assumptions. But, how clear are we about these influences, particularly as they shape relations between elite worlds and that majority of voluntary activities less capable of easy labelling-hence terms like 'primordial soup'.

Even the author concludes "we know very little" (pp.109-110) about them.

This problem of 'little knowing' confronts all who would seek to penetrate the political machinations of our ragged, frustrating democracy: a point underlined in a recent review of a book about lobby groups in UK society. (Hinsliff, 2014). Too many questions remain about how a voluntary establishment exercises influence beyond the M25, but we have to thank the author for raising these issues.

For example, who reads academic textbooks, and keeps up to date with the veritable 'tsunami' of online reports from government agencies and national voluntary organisations? I was part of a research study in a medium-sized northern town, which asked local authority officers with special responsibility for voluntary matters, and prominent voluntary activists the same question. The answers were both dispiriting and encouraging. Firstly, most people were simply too busy. They skimmed or filed their in-trays. Secondly, it was just possible that they had thereby 'protected' themselves from some of the hegemonic influences attributed by the author to the voluntary establishment. What do we know about the knowledge-transmission mecha-

mechanisms within these worlds? What is the equivalent agency in the voluntary/community world to the `Sun` or `Daily Mail`? How much do we really know about voluntary vernacular i.e. the everyday perceptions and behaviours of the so-called non-elites? (I prefer the term `Indigenous Elites`, but this has its own pitfalls).

On the other hand, do we really know so little about the `soup` or is it just that we haven't learnt how to research and write about it as much as the more accessible formal organisations? After all, this book and its predecessor (Rochester et al. 2010) have urged us to move beyond what they call `flat earth` conceptions of voluntary action and adopt a more `rounded` view. Flat and Round are a start. I prefer `Rough`. The latter more accurately conveys a hint of the uneven landscapes and behaviours out there. One geographer (De Blij, 2009, p.9) attempts to flesh out the metaphor. For him, flatness, the idea of neat, one-dimensional models of voluntary action, may be male, in that it appeals to a certain formal, bureaucratic way of thinking. He, then, goes on to argue that the significance of gender arises because “---the most local of locals” are women. (Op cit, p.166).

And so the soup begins to take shape. Not round but rough. More female than male. More fluid than formed. No doubt these are dangerous waters. Lazy stereotypes of homely `earth mothers` must be resisted, but if we want to theorise about landscapes it may be as important to begin from the ground as from above. Let's have pictures and stories from the pre-school, the luncheon club and WI, and see how we can connect them with the hegemonies. Then, the beginnings of counter-hegemony may become clearer.

How do we research the rough landscape? Firstly, be wary of the rush to **local** studies. Better to construct **focal** case studies, designed to test out some of the ideas in this book. If the author hasn't blotted his proverbial copybook with the criticisms in his chapters, he'd be the ideal person to look again (= `Re-discover`) at the behaviours of the elites. Secondly, we should try to ensure that critical scrutiny is not directed solely at the big battalions. Indeed, we need to understand more clearly how far and why the latter may be necessary. At the same time we must avoid assuming that what Roger Lohman calls the `Commons` are inevitably as communal and non-coercive as Colin suggests (e.g. p. 226). Finally, we should expect critical focal studies to be as uneven and incomplete as the landscapes under study are rough edged and dynamic. A

key element here will be the ability of the researcher to take time in which to creatively engage and work with the focal inhabitants.

Uneven, rough landscapes require a corresponding mix of research approaches. The one or two hour interview won't always suffice. At least, try to spend twenty-four hours at a time, to catch the daily social flow: only a few appear able to take months and years in one place or network. Until, that is, we realise the existence of indigenous observers and commentators who have been doing just that. The challenge, then, is to be able to utilise social skills alongside academic ones-to gain trust and build small reciprocities. Participation is a much used word at this point. We need, however, to be prepared to construct critical accounts of the ways in which participatory approaches do and don't work.

If we want to rediscover indigenous voluntary action, the groaning shelves of research text books will need to be counterbalanced by a range of alternatives. No more 'primordial soup', if only because some definitions patronisingly assume this refers to an "early stage of de-

velopment" rather than having been around for a long time. (See Collins English Dictionary, Third Updated Edition, 1994, p.1234). Instead, a rich tapestry of views and behaviours demonstrating how it is not so much a matter of helping elites know more ,but rather of ensuring that the majority of voluntary and community actors can know so much more about elites.

The Rediscovery of voluntary action has been wider, deeper and longer than we often realise. Two additions to this book's very comprehensive Bibliography remind us of this. Paul Hoggett's edited collection places contestation at the heart of community experience (Hoggett, 1997), whilst Margaret Ledwith's best-selling examination of community development (Ledwith, 2011) reminds us that even the 'High Priests' (Gramsci and Freire) cannot escape critical attention.

Colin Rochester has taken a committed and courageous route through some key issues and challenges in contemporary voluntary action. His provocative book deserves to be widely read in order to stimulate creative debate.

Duncan Scott (March,2014)

Further Reading

De Blij, H (2009), *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny and Globalisation's Rough Landscape*, New York, O.U.P

Hinsliff, G (2014), *Who will stick up for the little guy?*, *The Guardian*, 8.3.14

Hoggett, P, edit(1997), *Contested Communities: Experiences ,struggles, Policies*, Bristol, The Policy Press

Jeffries, M (2014), *The Legacy of Stuart Hall*, *The Guardian*, 11.2.14

Ledwith, M (2011, 2nd edition), *Community Development: A critical approach*, Bristol, The Policy Press

Rochester, C, Ellis-Paine, A & Howlett, S, (2010), *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan



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The ARVAC 2014 Annual Lecture

RIBA

66 Portland Place

London W1B 1AD

Thursday 29th May 2014

Professor Jenny Pearce, Bradford University

Organising in the Neighbourhood: The Potential and Ambiguities of New Forms of Community Activism

Programme

1pm Arrivals & registration

2pm Lecture: Professor
Jenny Pearce

Response: Nick Ockenden

Q&A chaired by Professor
John Diamond

4pm Refreshments

5pm Close

Discussant: Nick Ockenden,
Institute for Volunteering
Research, NCVO

The event will be chaired by
Professor John Diamond, Chair
of ARVAC

ARVAC is grateful for the support of
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ABOUT ARVAC

ARVAC – the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector - is a membership organisation which was founded in 1978 to provide a focal point for the handful of people engaged in the emerging field of voluntary sector research. In more recent years it has concentrated its work on the community sector and community research.

We believe that

- healthy, diverse and inclusive communities make a fundamental contribution to people's quality of life and living conditions;
- healthy communities are created and sustained by the activities of effective local organisations and groups;
- research has a major role to play in promoting supporting, and developing the work of local organisations and groups; and
- participation in the research process and access to its products should be freely and widely available.

We aim to

- act as a resource to people interested in research in or on community organisations;
- promote and help develop effective and appropriate forms of research in or on community organisations;
- encourage and facilitate networking and collaboration between people undertaking work in this field;
- ensure that the findings of research in and on community organisations are made available to policy-makers at all levels; and
- play a role in identifying gaps in knowledge of the community sector and the need for further research.



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promoting effective community action
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- Information about research in progress
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