4

Getting off the Fence and Steppin' Outta the Clinic Room

The Walk the Talk Crew

During the last decade, politics around the world has seen a significant shift to the right (Leahy, 2018; Malik, 2018; Shuster, 2016) following the world financial crisis that started in 2007 with the US subprime mortgage market collapse. We have witnessed more polarisation in debates, coupled with an increase in extreme views and evangelism on both sides of the political fence (Lee et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2014; Townsend, 2018). There have been an increasing number of political protests, and a marked increase in terrorism-related incidents from between 1000 and 2000 per year around the year 2000 to a peak of nearly 17,000 in 2014 (Roser, 2017). The media reporting of our world—particularly in new and social media spheres—has reflected, and arguably driven, the social polarisation that this combination of economic instability and emphasis on terror attacks has fuelled (Lee et al., 2018; Lewis, 2018). Many western nations have found their populace turning their attention inwards (European Commission, 2017; Kagan, 2018) while far right groups have flourished in both the USA and Europe (Jones, 2018; Townsend, 2019).

The rise of social media has provided a loudspeaker to many who had previously struggled to make their voice heard—a great boon to both groups and individuals who wish to stand up for those who have suffered as a result of their status in society. However, these loudspeakers broadcast with little of the

The Walk the Talk Crew (✉)
Lancaster, UK
e-mail: stephen.Weatherhead@liverpool.ac.uk

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social or legal censorship we have previously relied upon to moderate some messages. In what have become perilous times for many in society as inequality for many groups has grown (Partington, 2018; Sowels, 2018) and fiscal policy has become largely driven by austerity (Goodman, 2018), activism is urgently needed to redress the issues our political polarisation has caused. This is an environment that is full of opportunity for activists to inform and influence with unprecedented reach. It also brings with it many dangers where both message and actions can rapidly be miscast by authorities and the general public.

Social media is regularly portrayed as being primarily an echo chamber for poorly informed opinions (Robson, 2018), a reputation which spawned the derogatory terms clicktivist and slacktivism. This is highlighted by the numerous political advocacy issues that rapidly gain momentum in the online sphere but fail to drive people to take action beyond the use of a single mouse click (Taylor, 2014). However, the grassroots mobilisation which drove the success of the occupy movement in 2011, Black Lives Matter in 2013, and the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders campaigns in the 2016 US election showed that social media campaigns have the ability to influence action beyond the computer screen. Perhaps not surprisingly, what appears to drive success in converting exposure on social media and harnessing a 'twitterstorm' to drive physical action is personal resonance and a sense of grievance (Moyer, 2017).

This social media arms race is one which is shared by both the political left and right, terrorist, extremist and activist groups (Donovan, 2019). In many cases, the messages could not be more different but the approaches the groups take have developed many commonalities. It is perhaps inevitable that as a result of the electronic activities of various dissenting groups becoming more comparable, governmental organisations are now blurring their definitions of terrorism and extremism with activism becoming part of a melting pot of what are seen as 'potential threats' (Monaghan & Walby, 2012). The approaches to these threats are also worryingly homogeneous with non-violent protesters being treated as security threats and investigated by security services (Byrne, 2017). This issue is not limited to policing. Resisting extremism in any form is increasingly becoming portrayed in the media as a form of extremism itself and denounced as an attack on free speech. A social boundary has been constructed by many nation states, through both legislation and rhetoric, to define acceptable dissent not just by action but also by source (Salter, 2011). While it would generally be agreed that, when not in extremism, the actions of dissenters need limits, the freedom for those in power to silence groups based on message certainly raises significant concerns for freedom of expression.

What of the oppressed and silenced; the activists who are challenging the status quo in order to stand up for equality? People who stand up against the system often do so at great personal risk. Consider, for example, the person on benefits protesting against DWP policy or a person seeking asylum campaigning for better refugee care. These activists for social justice and others like them are in a position of attempting to balance risk and reward while seeking to implement a form of responsible activism which can be effective in an environment hostile to any challenge to power. There will always be a need for activist groups who are truly representing those who have been denied power and address those who hold it. Our world would be a significantly poorer place were it not for those who have had the courage to use their voice in the name of others. The current technological environment provides us with a greater reach to our voices than ever before but with the potential for significant backlash (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, this has always been the case for those who speak truth to power, be it against slavery, voting rights, apartheid, animal rights or green issues (Kurtz, 2010; Potter, 2011; Watts & Vidal, 2017). What we must hold close is that the courage to do what we believe is right continues to have the potential to overcome.

In psychology, one of the professional barriers we have to overcome in making a difference beyond 1:1 therapy is that of territorialism. We have an array of professional psychology groupings, counselling, clinical, occupational, community… the list is huge. Whilst this chapter places itself primarily in clinical and community psychology, we do not feel an ownership of any of the spaces in which we work. We are novices, temporary features of an ever-changing landscape. There have always been psychologists who work beyond 1:1 therapy, so in writing a chapter about the role of clinical psychologists in affecting social change, we recognise that we are 'standing on the shoulders of giants'. Sometimes the falling of a giant leads to a visible response; it feels as though the impact of the death of David Smail has reverberated across the clinical psychology community. Many of us who have been inspired by David, now feel a responsibility to continue to develop his work. This, combined with the shocks and after-shocks of austerity measures in the UK, and the rise of right-wing politics across Western Europe and the USA, has led to closer collaboration with the people affected by socio-economically oppressive policies. There has been a need to become more visible and present within our communities. If ever there was a time to unite and affect change for the psychological wellbeing of our communities, it is now.

Walk the Talk

In 2015 a number of us united to walk together from the British Psychological Society office in Leicester to the London office, a journey of just over 100 miles. We slept rough along the way and called at food banks, homeless shelters, mental health services and other spaces in order to gather testimonies of people affected by homelessness, food poverty and the welfare system. Our idea started in dialogue and was shared by word of mouth as the plan formed. Support grew via our social media presence and as more people 'joined the conversation' about #walkthetalk2015 the idea began to develop its own momentum. More information, video testimonies and resources can be accessed via the Walk the Talk website—http://walkthetalk2015.org/.

Our goals were simple; we wanted to get out of the clinic room, and show a desire to make a difference, and do what we could to influence the policy landscape which holds more than 20% of the population in poverty. 'Mainstream' media coverage and an invitation to Westminster to meet with Luciana Berger, the then Shadow Minister for Mental Health, suggest those goals were achieved. However, this doesn't tell the full story of the journey, a journey that wasn't really ours; we were just finding a way to walk alongside the people who were living the tremors that came with the earthquake of Political decisions, people who are too often silenced. Within the story of the journey, there is a tale in itself. As James, one of the group who walked the whole 100+ miles, testifies in his 'psycho-logical analysis' he had already made a very similar journey but because he lacked professional standing, he was unable to gain political influence.

Psycho-Logical Analysis

By James McLean

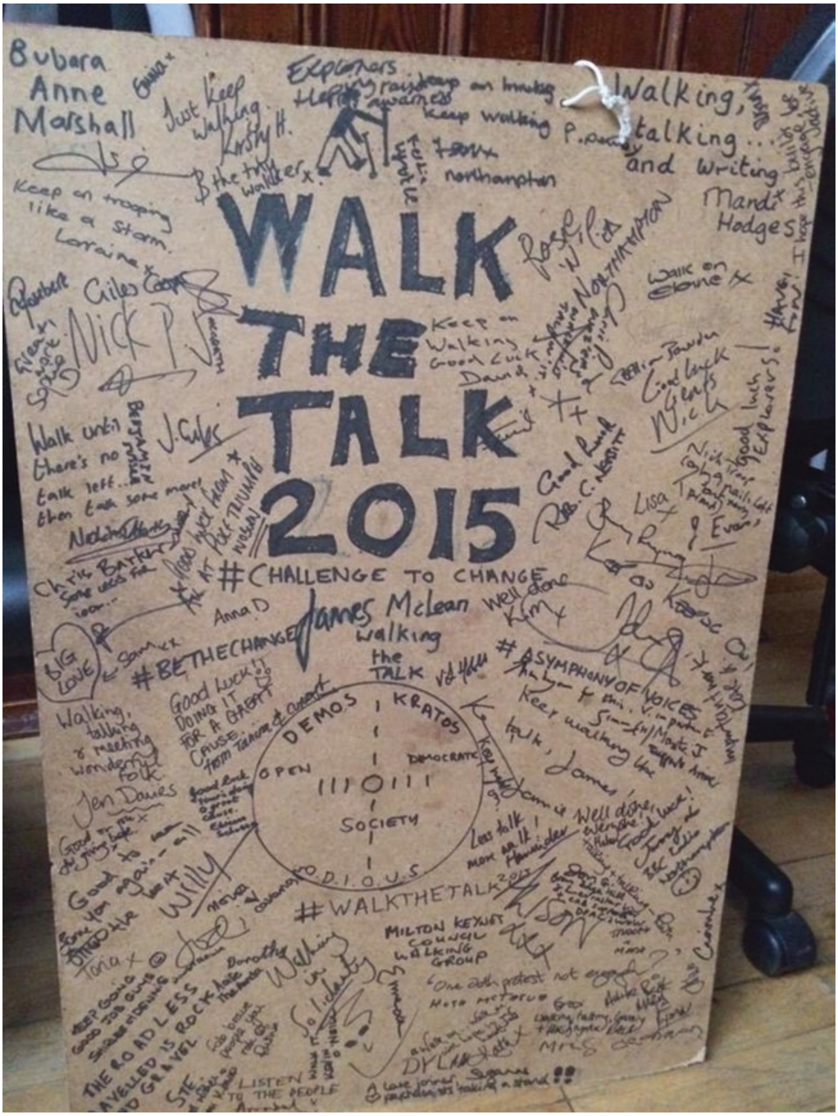
When I first heard that a bunch of psychologists were planning to walk from Leicester to London along 'A' roads to raise awareness of the impact of benefits changes and sanctions on the mental health of their clients and people across the country, I knew I had to bring a bit of 'mental' to their campaign. I found out through my psychologist Dr Suzanne Elliott who had helped me through some of my own difficulties and who was going to join us for a day of the five day walk. She told me about it because three years earlier I had taken a very similar pilgrimage to London from Leicester to raise awareness of the rise in homelessness (at the time I had done it homelessness stood at 50000 across the UK). Homelessness had risen to over 100,000 by the time we were walking to London. It was very extra-ordinary for professionals in a sometimes unfairly maligned field of medicine to take such extreme steps and to essentially potentially put their professional careers at risk. A group of twenty or so of us or 21 if you include our mascot Stormy Weathers (a toy storm trooper) set off from

the BPS offices in Leicester and we set off to someone playing the bagpipes no less. The organiser Dr Steven Weatherhead (our drill sergeant) was apprehensive of me coming along as I turned up with a luggage trolley, a swivel-chair and various mascots. He need not have worried this was not my first rodeo and, to be fair to him, ***I*** *would have been concerned if I had turned up to* ***my*** *event. This was an eclectic mix of people from the field of psychology including academics, clinical psychologists and people with varying degrees and of psychological problems (plus someone from international rescue, true story). I would have said beforehand that I was the worst of those but now I worry for my psychologist friends mental health and sanity (I mean, seriously, walking along 'A' roads? all the way to London?! I have psychological problems, I have an excuse!). The journey itself taught me and them a few things:*

- *Psychologists don't always sit on the fence*
- *Never take directions from anyone from International Rescue… (I brought a compass and I genuinely do believe I was the sanest and most decisive of the group).*
- *Never expect a psychologist to make a definite decision without at least a half hour debate.*
- *Also "Never doubt that a small group of committed, determined citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" Dr Margaret Mead circa 1930's.*
- *"You have got to challenge to change and be that change to inspire meaningful change" James McLean circa 40 seconds ago.*

We talked a lot with James over the course of the walk about how in taking this kind of action we are amplifying each other's voices; it is a reciprocal process. At times James talked of his experiences of being silenced in the past and watched this change as the Walk the Talk Crew alliance grew. Likewise, those of us with some 'role power' (Proctor, 2002) as professional psychologists frequently felt that the Walk the Talk Crew were given the opportunity to share our perspectives partly because of the alliance we had with those with lived experience. So whether it's Voltaire, Spiderman, or someone else who first said that "with great power comes great responsibility", we as psychological professionals have to act. Whether we like to admit it or not, the psychological professions have standing at an individual, community and societal level. We, therefore, have a responsibility to use that standing in order to influence social policies.

During Walk the Talk, we gathered testimonies through meeting and talking with people at various projects set up to address homelessness, food poverty or welfare reforms during Walk the Talk. We were given consent to share these testimonies on social media and via our website. They also formed part of the evidence we presented to the Shadow Minister for Mental Health, some examples follow.



Phillipa told us about the impact of the so-called Bedroom Tax on her relationships and her own survival:

> *One of my friends is homeless and if I ever help my friend and let him sleep on the sofa I will get in trouble for that, see, so if you go and help someone you get in trouble as well, because he is staying at yours if you help them out. They just basically class you as having someone live with you and they put full rent on you and then they back*

date you to when you were helping him thinking that he's living there and he's not and then you've got to pay back all the rent from when that time was.

And it's like this bedroom tax that's what highers up your rent and all this lot so if you're in arrears you've got to pay off all that before you even think about getting any food. They expect the money to be with them and if you haven't go no money for food, they don't really care.

I've gotta find ways to pay it, I've got to ask my mum or I've gotta ask friends, and then when I do get my money in I've gotta pay back them. And you've gotta pay your rent as well, so by the time you've done that you've got no money for food or gas or electric, they don't really care, they don't care at all.

The council didn't tell me for 6 months that I had to pay the bedroom tax, that's why I've got the arrears.

When we spoke to Dennis, he wanted to impress on us how complicated the benefits system is, and the real-life problems caused by a lack of cohesion in the system:

If you put in a claim for ESA, let just say for example it takes 3 weeks to process that, and if you're declined for the ESA claim, then you need to start a new claim of Job Seekers Allowance so potentially then that's 3 weeks when you're waiting for your benefit to get declined which you're not getting money, so essentially what you're doing is the Government is stopping you from getting money from the date when you initially start your claim. If ESA and JSA were both in the same department, if you're applying for ESA and you get declined they just automatically send you onto JSA then so that you get your money from the start date.

You don't get any money while you're waiting for the claim to be processed. They do say that it takes up to 14 working days which is almost 3 weeks. So you have to go without money through that period. You are entitled to short term benefit advance, but then that is only a minimum amount of money as well it could be £20 or £30 it's what they deem a suitable amount to live on but we all know that £20 or £30 doesn't go very far in this day and age, so, yeah that's something that needs to be looked at I think.

*the specifics of these arrangements may have changed since 2015 when Dennis told us about his experiences.

Theresa told us about the impact that social policy and cuts to public sector services have on the ability for people to connect with community and a meaningful life:

There have been such a lot of cuts around Camden, wards have been closed, everything. They've started now that it's- you can't come here unless you're funded. You can't just come as a day centre or a drop in. You have to have personal income and

you've got to wait until that's sorted out for you, and that takes months. And in the mean time people have got nowhere to go, in hospitals, turned away, nothing to do. So it's really about the cuts and of course the stigma. But we have to live with that, but it's really trying to improve the quality of life for people with mental health problems.

It's important because it's a place where we can all come and we've all got a mental health problem and we're all comfortable with each other and whatever's going on it stays in the centre. And that's how it is. It's good to have someplace to come where you can be yourself, meet your friends, a lot of volunteers work here, the place is nearly run by volunteers. Even if you don't feel like going out it's good that you've got some place to go.

I suffer with mild autism, which is coping with anxiety. And for me I need to be in an environment that is suitable and instructive and there's sustainability in the environment and if that's not the case then it's not the right environment for me.

John, who works at the food bank we visited, told us about how the demand for food banks has grown over the years and how the work of food banks is so much broader than providing food:

The food bank here has been going for this is our 11th year. The growth has been really quite exponential. When we first started we gave out 1000 food parcels in a year, we now give out 1000 each month. Some of that you can put down to the profile of food banks across the country has been escalated by political debate by need being identified, so there are far more food banks than there ever were in 2004. But we as a local grass roots organisation, we weren't asked to be set up by Government, we don't get Government money, we're supported entirely by the good will and the support of people in the community. They give us the food they give us their time as volunteers and thankfully they give us money as well. And that combination has kept us going and growing. As the need has escalated, and I suppose the biggest development has been in the last 3 or 4 years, we've gone from 9000 to 14000 food parcels, we've had to really ratchet up where we get the food from.

But the fact remains that nobody actually want to come to a food bank in my experience. There is a stigma. They feel nervous, they feel shy, worried, angry sometimes. And when they do come they are always grateful for what they get. Most of the people we see, things have broken down in their lives. Sometimes through their own fault, most times through not their own fault. They perhaps don't always have the skills and the competencies to cope with the kind of things that life throws at them; bureaucracy particularly is something a lot of people don't understand. And I think the gap between when something goes wrong in somebody's life and when the state can come in and intervene and help has got wider. I suppose the difficulty is that there are people that live their life in a way that they're almost in continual crisis,

and they're the more, they're the people with enduring problems of one sort or another that we're not really geared up to help. But as a charity, our default position is to help and we will help, but we work a lot with other agencies, so the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the local authorities, the social services but also churches, also doctors surgeries, schools, all of the other charities that provide support to people in the community. And if we didn't do that we'd be very irresponsible I think, because we're not like an open door where you just come and get food whatever the circumstances, there needs to be a path that somebody's on to sorting out their problems, because unless they sort those problems out, that dependency and that link is not going to be broken.

We collected and shared these narratives and offer them here in order to ground the knowledge we present in lived experience. This has always been essential critical community psychology praxis, but may be even more important in the 'post-truth' era when 'expertise' is dismissed by sections of the political elite. As psychologists we have 'role power' (Proctor, 2002) that affords us a platform to speak. However, as Gupta (2019) commented, if we speak only from a position of 'expert by qualification' we are less easy to identify with and our voice and therefore the knowledge, too, is diminished. Speaking with a collective voice which is rich with a range of experiences, including those of 'Experts by Experience', amplifies all our voices and the narrative reaches further, so is arguably more powerful and more likely to contribute to social change.

The advancement of social media has perhaps made it easier than ever to affect policy change (see Fig. 4.1). We can all engage with mainstream media, social media, and blogging. Although engaging in this way can seem inconsequential, Fig. 4.1 shows how it can often act as a pre-curser to service innovations and empirical research, which can then in turn directly affect policy change. This is all set within the context of the often conflicting perspectives of The Houses of Parliament and Lords, and activist individuals and groups. It is important that we show an awareness of the contexts depicted in Fig. 4.1; listen to all voices, and find mechanisms for influence. There are many ways we can do this, but the main message is that we must do it. If we do not act and speak where others' voices are not being heard, then we are in many ways complicit in oppressions and marginalisations.

We are familiar with the 'hero-innovator' within leadership literature, which has of course been updated in various leadership frameworks. Perhaps the time has come to embody more action-focussed approach. In doing so we would advocate four elements to theory and practice development:

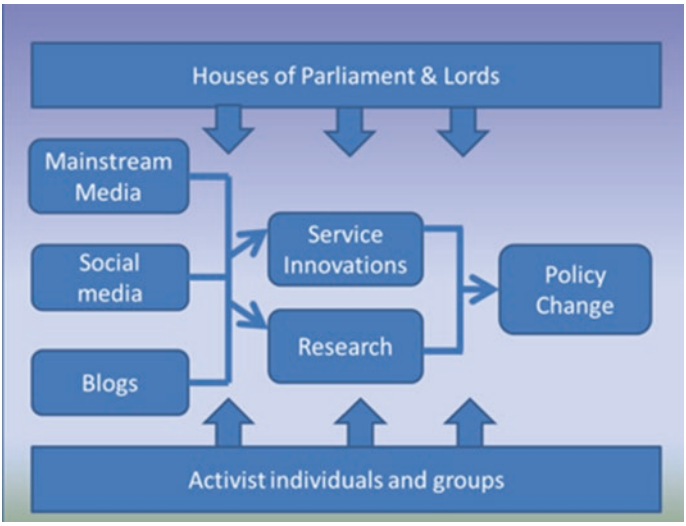


Fig. 4.1 Affecting policy change

1. Innovation
2. Influencing
3. Activism
4. Agitation/Resistance

Argue that innovation in itself isn't enough to affect social change, we must also consider the potential impact of our methods for disseminating those innovations. Whether we are working from a position of ego or altruism, our goal is to affect change in some form. Is there any point in psychology if it doesn't have some form of influence? Yes, we can influence on an individual level, but if we are to make direct therapy redundant (which should be the ultimate goal) then our influence needs to be at a societal level. Perhaps the only way to do this is to embrace activism and agitate in order to resist and challenge oppressive practices.

We need to question the relative reluctance of professional bodies to 'bite the (Political) hand that feeds them' and take an action-orientated approach to social change. We must involve the next generation of psychologists as early as possible in order to embed the notion that working visibly with our communities is a regular part of what is expected of psychologists. We must find ways to reduce the potential of repeating the mistakes of silence and collusion that our professions have made in the past.

Action-Focussed Teaching

Every year we facilitate teaching to Leicester DClinPsy trainees about disempowerment, gender and social action. This teaching attempts to bring the 'social action' element of the community psychology curriculum to life by making it a bit more 'action'. We get out of the classroom and utilise the teaching day and the trainee group as a resource to local people. Over the years we have built relationships with community groups in Braunstone, a residential area within the city of Leicester.

Until the 1920s, Braunstone was mainly farmland. However, the population of Leicester increased and in 1936 a large social housing estate was built in Braunstone as part of a 'slum clearance' programme. Currently, within the wider Leicester community, Braunstone is seen as a deprived area and has been associated with negative views and unhelpful discourses.

In 2016, the cohort of trainees we taught planned a walk collecting stories about the impact of homelessness, food poverty and welfare reforms to support the work of #walkthetalk2015 and Psychologists Against Austerity (PAA).

We visited four different community support organisations in Braunstone. They told us about:

- the impact of the current climate on staff: housing support staff on long-term sick due to being distressed by having to turn people away and 'gatekeep' resources
- reductions in staff by as much as 50% due to cuts to voluntary sector funding
- navigating hostile, complicated and ever-changing systems to get support
- running out of energy for seeking support due to being turned away so frequently
- feeling that their voices were not heard by those in power
- the impact of benefits 'sanctions'; examples including residents being able to eat, becoming emaciated and experiencing many physical health problems
- fleeing domestic violence but also having mental health problems and following cuts in refuge provision locally, being placed in a mixed homeless hostel where violent men and other offenders were housed
- fear about the imminent transition to Universal Credit (UC) and concern about having to make difficult choices (e.g. between paying for school uniforms or shoes for their children) at the same time as saving enough of the UC payment for rent
- worries about the future for their children, 'things are getting worse'

One woman from the community was moved to email us afterwards to say that government "pledges to support victims and survivors of childhood abuse are meaningless when they close down all the services survivors rely on to recover and feel part of society as adults. When they close hostels, refuges, cut benefits, cut restorative justice services, mental health services, it's abuse survivors who suffer… living in poor conditions, using food banks, no heating, no disability care, no emotional support, no hostel places, isolation…" We were all moved by the stories that were shared with us that day, and were humbled that the community felt able to share them with us.

Trainees and facilitators collated the stories from local residents into a document. We discovered that we had heard stories relating to all five of the themes identified by PAA in their briefing paper about the psychological consequences of austerity (https://psychagainstausterity.wordpress.com/psychological-impact-of-austerity-briefing-paper/). We used these themes to structure a dossier of evidence which was taken by the #Walkthetalk2015 collective to the meeting with Luciana Berger MP. Psychologists and activists with lived experiences of homelessness, the benefits system, food poverty and

mental health services travelled to meet the MP. During the meeting she listened to first-hand accounts of these things and copies of the dossier were left with her. At the meeting, she pledged to use the individual stories she had heard that day and those contained in the dossier to hold the Government to account. She told us that personal accounts were particularly powerful during parliamentary debates because the Government were less able to respond dismissively to questions if they were based on a constituent's experience.

We have begun to spread the word about this way of teaching to other DClinPsy courses, through a blog (psychologycultures@wordpress.com) and at the UK Group of Trainers conference. Each year the teaching adapts to the requests and challenges being faced by the Braunstone community through an ongoing dialogue with community leaders and grassroots organisations. Last year, the teaching took the form of a dig alongside local residents on a growing project in Braunstone which was then used to grow fresh veg for the local food share.

The social action teaching day is exhausting; although perhaps more emotionally than physically. One of the side effects of work at the level of the social context can be feelings of being overwhelmed by the extent of the marginalisation and powerlessness of oppressed groups. This is another reason why we would advocate for working as part of a collective. It is then possible to share the impact and hope that the sense of being overwhelmed hits individuals in the collective at different times so that the rest of the collective can support and re-energise those who are struggling. As trainers we have very much appreciated and been re-energised by the investment that trainees have given to these teaching days, even if they are not convinced by community psychology initially. Over the course of offering this teaching, we have been struck by how willing trainees are to suspend any scepticism about this different approach and take up our invitation to work with communities. Some have even reported to us that their opinions about CP changed on the basis of just this one day stepping out of the classroom; this is humbling to witness. Trainees' time, energy and enthusiasm for critical analysis and social justice is a resource that can be utilised and very much appreciated by communities if care is taken to ensure that we are walking alongside them.[1]

[1] An earlier version of this account of the social action teaching was published here: https://psychologycultures.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/taking-social-action-with-trainees-walking-and-talking-in-the-name-of-social-justice/.

The psychologists walking 100 miles to fight austerity's impact on mental health

Psychologists embark on a mental health march to raise awareness of the devastating effect that cuts are having on their patients

How to… Get off the Fence

We hope we have not sanitised this work in the telling or made it sound easy. It can be complex, murky, overwhelming, time consuming, draining and heartbreaking. It can also be moving, energising, growthful, humbling, inspiring, hopeful and immensely rewarding. For these reasons we urge readers to get off the fence and 'step out' today. We offer the following ideas for you to take with you on your journeys:

- Find allies: join an existing network, or create one. Don't be a hero, share the impact as well as the joy.
- Say yes! Engage with mainstream media, social media and blogging.
- If you don't have it, make sure you acquire 'street level' knowledge: psychologists are often seen as aloof and even those of us who do not consider ourselves to be academics can be viewed as confined to or hiding in 'ivory towers'.

- Challenge to change: Be bold. Use the power you have (the title clinical psychologist, for example, comes with some power which we can utilise in our social justice work). Do not be afraid to be seen or heard. Act and speak where others' voices are silenced; this can include creating opportunities or platforms on which silenced voices can take centre stage. None of us have lost our jobs over this; as a profession we need to be mindful of falling into self-policing away from social action.
- Reach out beyond the boundaries of your professional group: there is no need to compete with those who are working towards the same goals, choose your battles… there are plenty of them.
- Acknowledge those who have inspired you and stand on their shoulders: we are growing their ideas, we cannot be sure where this will go, we are all novices, our influence in this world is temporary, tread gently, and invest your time with passion.
- Welcome new connections: allow others to stand on your shoulders, including those who are otherwise invisible/d.
- Get out of the clinic room: meet people in communities with expertise relating to the issues you are taking action about, walk alongside them, listen and learn from them. Take action in public spaces where it can reach communities and the wider social context (there's no reason why your action can't take place in a university, but make sure you involve and invite the local community; make it free and accessible).
- Be the change: know yourself and take a stand for something you passionately care about.

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