

Practice Issues – Interview of Niki Harré by Nicholas Carr

Niki Harré was invited by the Rafto Institute for human rights and Bergen Municipality, and came all the way to Norway from New Zealand, via San Diego. She was also invited to Naples, but could not come this time as she had already arranged to go to The Netherlands and Germany. Niki is Professor of Community Psychology in Auckland, New Zealand, and author of the recently published book, *Psychology for a Better World: Strategies to Inspire Sustainability*, which has resulted in wide debate and positive reactions. She held an engaging talk at the United Nations Climate Conference recently, where this interview took place (October 2013).

Welcome to Bergen, the west coast capital of Norway! After reading your book, *Psychology for a Better World*, I became curious to investigate the connections between community psychology (CP) and environmental psychology. What effect do you think the climate crisis has had on the development of community psychology as a practical and academic profession?

Very little as yet. CP tends to build itself around concepts like social justice, poverty, and homelessness and in this way usually limits itself to overcoming human suffering. There is a small movement towards environmental social justice within CP. This is mostly about local pollution issues and how less privileged communities are often the location for toxic industries and waste disposal. CP has not yet integrated the implications of climate change in its professional education and practical work. In any academic discipline, it takes a long time to change the core focus. People have not yet come to terms with the close relationship between climate change and social justice. As a value-based discipline, CP could include ecological wellbeing in its sphere of concern. This would include considering ecological systems as precious and worthy of our care in their own right. Of course we also depend on

these systems for our wellbeing. If we expanded the field of CP to include ecological issues, then we will bring it closer to environmental psychology. CP could also contribute to environmental psychology, because of our understanding of how people work in groups and communities.

Do you think working with sustainability will attract more psychologists to the profession of community psychology?

We can expect this to grow in the future, because the climate problems will not go away by themselves. In New Zealand I find there is more professional concern from people in disciplines other than psychology. Many people in the natural sciences want psychologists to be involved, because they understand these problems are about how people think, feel, and behave, but psychologists are lagging behind. This is a pity as CP could contribute a great deal through our understanding of how to work with groups towards positive social change. Our focus on social justice also means we are able to approach solutions in a way that is good for people as well as the environment. As a society, we need to decide what kind of world we want to live in. Do we want a sustainable community or a materially-rich one? Do we want a participatory democracy that respects diversity? We need to build positive visions of the future – as suggested by the CP Julian Rappaport – ‘Tales of Joy’ that attract both our colleagues and communities to be part of the movement for sustainability.

It is easy to teach children to care about wildlife. For example, my daughter is concerned about the effects of rubbish going into the sea because she has been taught it harms sea creatures. Wisdom is holistic knowledge, knowing how things are connected. If we are truly ‘whole’ we will try to avoid harmful or destructive practices. Wise people care for others, both human and non-human.

Should we join forces to make an impact, across the disciplines of environmental, architecture, and community psychology?

At my university in Auckland, New Zealand, most staff in the School of Psychology do not engage in environmental issues. As with most psychologists, their priority is to understand people and they do so within their particular specialty. Mainstream modern psychology is more interested in brain imaging than in how people are affecting the environment that sustains them. This is a pity. If we stand alone as a discipline, we are weaker; we need to fly in a flock – then we are stronger and reach further. At my university I work with the environment coordinator and colleagues in geography, anthropology, town planning, law, biology, and engineering on these issues.

If you were to build a European Master of Community Psychology course, should environmental psychology be included?

Definitely! Or rather we should call it ‘ecopsychology’ – a broader concept that includes other parts of psychology as well. There is an international journal called *Ecopsychology* that is worth looking into. It deals with many issues such as how people benefit from time in nature, and how we are connected to nature at a deep psychological level. Many of our archetypes relate to natural objects and I think it is difficult to argue that people can thrive in a society that is damaging the environment. Our models must be future-based and take into account the changes and long-term effects of climate change. I also feel we need to take a much broader approach than the one advocated by social marketing. This approach suggests we should try and ‘change behaviour’ by using similar techniques to commercial advertising or health promotion. That is, we should focus on the behaviour itself and not worry about what people think. It assumes that we, the experts, know the solution and the goal is to make people behave in accordance with it. I think a CP approach should instead be to get

people and communities acting towards a wide variety of positive solutions and taking ownership of these issues. We should be drawing on communities’ creative solutions, not trying to make people do what we want. The social marketing approach does not threaten the basis of a consumerist capitalist society; it tries to make small changes within that paradigm. I think CP is more adventurous than that! We can aim for a society of inclusion and participation, and working out how we want to live well together on our planet is a great place to start.

We need to teach a new psychology and resist the idea of profit – that is, some people being allowed to extract more value from communities than they put in. Our core competencies should include methods for advocating sustainable lives and building sustainable communities. The pedagogical tools to manage this and teach sustainable practices are many; in my School, only one in eight courses in psychology at the graduate level is concerned with sustainability. The main thing is connecting practices to our hearts and minds. One way to do this is to take on a personal challenge for a couple of weeks – being a vegan, not eating at restaurants, cycling to work, taking the bus, and then experiencing the hazards and difficulties of this change. Action is a powerful tool for engaging and politicising students and ourselves.

What is your future dream for all psychologists?

I would love to see sustainability as a core value in all our programmes. We all need to be part of creating a positive future.

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