

Learning through Life Narratives in Environmental and Community Psychology

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This project was conducted as part of pedagogical process designed to engage community psychology students with the stories of community psychology researchers and practitioners in the field using oral histories. The oral history in this project is that of an environmental psychologist, provided in conversation with a community psychology student to explore the intersection of community psychology and environmental psychology. The project aimed to connect classroom learnings with greater understandings of current work being done in the field, offering an opportunity to witness the narrative of a practitioner and to reflect on the relevance of the story to hopes and ideas for future practice. In analysing the information from the oral history, two major themes were generated: resource-collaboration and values-led practice. These themes are considered as they relate to community and environmental psychological work, and reflections are offered from the student perspective pertaining to implications for future learnings, praxis, and social change.

Key words: community psychology, environmental psychology, oral history, storytelling, pedagogy

In my experiences as a student of the Master of Applied Psychology (Community Psychology) course at Victoria University, I am particularly intrigued by the intentional and values-driven approach to practice. For me, this course is building upon my previous and current participation in spaces which focus on equity, connection, continued learning, and adapting to meet individual needs – such as my work in a community health setting, my previous research on the psychology of climate change, my participation in community psychology events, and my connection with a group of psychologists interested in the gendered issues relating to women and psychology. I am grateful to have connected with a remarkable network of supervisors and mentors to guide me through the application of community psychology frameworks, such as reconsidering power structures, maintaining a social justice focus, and considering interactions of societal and individual systems.

As I develop my understanding of these community psychology approaches and theories, I am finding that they are being integrated with my ongoing interest in the psychology of climate change. I am curious about the role that community psychology as a discipline could have in this space, and the ways that a coalescence of community and environmental psychology might manifest in practice. As an avenue of exploring these emerging questions, I decided to speak with an environmental psychologist as a part of my coursework, alongside an oral histories project undertaken with my cohort in the community psychology course.

Method

Project Aim

The broader oral histories project aimed to gather stories of community psychology to explore the diversity of research and practice in this field, and to summarise and critically analyse key

experiences and various influences that have shaped the journeys as shared by key informants. Community psychology students were given the opportunity to interview psychologists who had worked in the field of community psychology in order to learn about the everyday realities of research and practice in the profession we would soon be entering, and the potential applications of the theories and frameworks we had learned. We were invited to explore areas of interest and curiosity as they pertained to community psychology and our personal/professional journey. We considered who might be key informants best positioned to answer questions about being and becoming a community-engaged practitioner, researcher, and change agent.

In seeking a psychologist who shared my interest in community and environmental psychologies, I connected with Susie Burke, who has worked in this area for many years in a range of organisational, community, and clinical practice settings, using her knowledge and experience around disaster recovery, transitioning to a climate-safe future, speaking with children about climate change and how to help people cope with existential climate grief. I hoped that in speaking with Susie and hearing her story that I could develop greater insight into her experiences in this space of community and environmental psychologies, particularly to gain a deeper understanding of what practical environmental psychology entails, and the ways that community psychology contributes to Susie's work in a challenging yet vitally important and ever-changing field.

Oral History Methodology

The power of storytelling and life narratives has been documented in a range of contexts, including in teaching and learning (Landrum, Brakke, & McCarthy, 2019; Stovold, 2014). Oral history is a method of knowledge production that encourages engagement and reflexivity with narratives of lived experience (MacKay, 2016), so was chosen for use in this project. The democratic and collaborative nature of oral histories are well-aligned with community psychology research, as are the processes of critical reflection and resituation encouraged by this praxis (Llewellyn & Ng-A-Fook, 2020; MacKay, 2016). Mulvey et al. (2000, p. 885) wrote that "stories allow shifts across time and context, while facilitating contextualized, multilayered understanding of personal identities, social relationships, and cultural landscapes". This methodological process is well-aligned with the aim of the combined oral histories project, which was to engage in conversation and to bring together classroom learning with the journeys of psychologists, academics and others in order to develop a better understanding of the field and associated theories, methods, practice and roles. Within my project with Susie, I aimed to engage in the oral history process to witness her story of working at an intersection of environmental and community psychologies, and to reflect upon relevance to my own journey beginning in this space.

Project Design

In preparing for and designing the project, I first contacted Susie Burke via email to explain the project and to allow her to consider her interest in participating. Consent to participate was received through an affirmative email response and verbal consent at the time of the interview. There was no formal ethics application for this interview due to its place within a classroom exercise. The interview schedule was created with a focus on exploring the pathway to Susie's current role, and the effect of community psychology theories and approaches on Susie's practice. This schedule was not negotiated with Susie ahead of the interview; it was developed with the intent of guiding the conversation to meet the project's aims rather than as a prescriptive tool, allowing for organic conversation throughout.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interview with Susie was arranged for a mutually convenient time and lasted around one hour. This interview was conducted over video conferencing software to allow for myself and Susie to adhere to social distancing and COVID-19 lockdown requirements at the time of the project, and to reduce the constraints of time and distance that affect face-to-face meetings. Research indicates that face-to-face and video conferenced interviews do not substantially differ in regards to relationship, rapport and disclosure of information (Jenner & Myers, 2019). I feel that this generally aligns with my own experience in speaking with Susie, as we were able to speak quite freely and I felt I developed a good sense of her journey and her practice, as much as is possible in a relatively short time frame. The interview was recorded with consent and used to create a verbatim transcript. A categorical-content analysis approach was adopted for data analysis, in which the content of a narrative is analysed and explored for clusters of meaning through repeated reading and re-reading of the transcript (Hiles & Cermak, 2011; Langridge, 2007). Through this approach, emergent categories were determined through their frequency, significance, and relevance to the topic. These emergent categories were then analysed to explore overarching themes which were determined and revised to ensure they appropriately met the project aims. Given the personal nature of storytelling and oral histories, this project aimed to emphasise the shared authority of Susie's oral history and the manuscript by requesting feedback from Susie at key points in writing, to ensure that her story was not being misrepresented and for Susie to be comfortable with the information being shared. At each point of contact, Susie affirmed that she did not have reservations about her story as it was represented, and was comfortable with further dissemination.

A Summary of Susie Burke's Oral History

This section summarises the key aspects of Susie's oral history, and is interspersed with quotes from Susie to illustrate her thoughts and retain her voice. In speaking with me about her work at an intersection of environmental and community psychology, Susie shared her journey as it began in a clinical psychological setting. Whilst Susie completed her masters and PhD in clinical psychology, her focus – on social support and stress in women with breast cancer – drew upon her interest in group work and community psychology-aligned considerations of transformative change and holistic wellbeing.

During her time at university, Susie was introduced to the group Psychologists for the Prevention of War (later called Psychologists for Peace), which she describes as a key point in her professional journey. Susie's discussion around this group indicated that her membership, the connections with other psychologists involved, and the immersion within the broader theme of peace psychology, were key in forming Susie's work and career path; Susie later became the national convener. This group provided a space for Susie to do work that she was "drawn to", on "finding the underlying points of connection as being a way to transform conflict". This work was also crucial to Susie's role within an ecovillage she lived in, wherein she facilitated groups and provided education and support for conflict resolution.

Susie spoke about her connection with Psychologists for Peace and with influential members as key in leading to her next roles at the Victorian Parenting Centre and then the Australian Psychological Society (APS), where she stayed for 17 years. Susie's time at the APS was spoken of fondly, and it was clear that Susie found great meaning in the work focussed on community psychology/societal issues, such as: homelessness and issues of housing security, disaster recovery, Indigenous issues, parenting issues and family violence prevention. Over time, the team grew to create a "lovely team" of community psychologists who together had a wide range of professional interests that let them work on many projects for the benefit of APS

members and the general public. In this work, Susie created many tip sheets and resources for the public, and enjoyed using her ability to adapt “incredibly dry academic, pedantic language into user-friendly language”. Susie also spoke of her excitement and delight when she was able to work with a community psychology student on placement who shared her interest in the psychology of climate change. This led to the creation of the Climate Change Empowerment Handbook (Australian Psychological Society, 2019), using Susie’s knowledge translation skills and climate change research to distil the literature into eight psychological strategies for engaging with climate change.

When Susie reflected on the skills she used in creating these resources and of her knowledge of environmental psychology, she considered the importance of an informal mentor-mentee relationship. Susie learned about environmental psychology from an expert in the field, who had studied environmental psychology in the USA where it is given a more robust focus than has been seen in Australia. This working relationship embodies Susie’s self-identified “upward orientation”, which she describes as an inclination to seek people who she “trusts and respects” and are more established, knowledgeable, or “expert” (Susie also explained the contrasting “downward orientation”, involving an inclination to work with people who are more junior in order to teach and inspire).

Susie reflected on more recent changes to her career, particularly the effects of a transitional stage at the APS and the subsequent changes to the work that she had been able to do autonomously, for the public good, with the colleagues that she had enjoyed working with. Susie spoke of her decision to leave the APS and pursue further meaningful work as a decision made in line with her values – appearing to be a strong moment of integrity – and with one of her personal rules: that she will only work with people that she believes share her values. These strongly held values were mirrored in other transitional decisions in Susie’s journey, both in relation to her professional workplaces and her activist practices.

Currently, Susie draws upon many of her past projects, roles, and learnings to inform her work in private practice as a registered generalist psychologist, as a consultant in environmental psychology for local organisations and councils and as a facilitator for holistic case discussion in a Balint group with local GPs. Susie describes herself as an environmental psychologist to reflect the many years of work and learning she has done in the realm of climate change mitigation and response, and when considering her identification with environmental psychology, she reflected on the importance of diversity within broader psychology, particularly for social issues. Susie spoke of the paradox of critical issues – especially climate change – receiving such limited attention within Australian psychology, despite these specialisations or disciplines “booming” in other parts of the world. Susie described finding great meaning in being able to use and share her knowledge and experience in environmental psychology and climate change mitigation and response. Susie speaks about her work in this area being driven by her knowledge of the importance of addressing this existential threat, almost as a calling that lets her incorporate her values, such as peace, integrity, and responsible action, with the knowledge and skills developed over her career.

In the future, Susie hopes to continue with her private practice and consulting whilst enjoying the time spent with her children while they are still living at home. Susie also plans to further develop her work in climate activism, noting specifically a “Ground Hug Day” campaign, in which people dedicate one day per week to climate emergency work. It is clear that Susie will continue to be driven by her values, to promote peaceful and climate-safe futures.

Key Themes

In analysing the information from Susie's oral history, themes and subthemes that became apparent were: *resource-collaboration* (in mentorship, and in groups); and *values led practice* (sustaining practice and informing transitions).

Resource-Collaboration

Susie spoke not so much of key experiences in her career, but of key people and influential collaborations, with Susie summarising: "pretty much everything that I work on always has an acknowledgement of the importance of working together with other people". Susie's role and the approach she takes to her practice appear to be aligned with the resource-collaborator ("scholar-activist") role described by Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010), characterised by strong collaborations with others, especially with community groups, using these collaborations to develop and share resources, as opposed to the traditional applied psychology role of expert ("scientist-practitioner").

In Mentorship

Susie spoke of the significance of her ongoing collaborations with key people in informal mentorship roles. Susie often linked these mentorship collaborations with her self-described "upward orientation", reflecting her valued relational experiences of learning from and being inspired by "cleverer" and "more expert" people. Susie also was "delighted" at the chance to work with a community psychology student on placement, a relationship in which she presumably adopted a more supervisory and guiding role.

Many of Susie's key relationships have been sustained across many years, across geographical distance, workplace changes, and many, many projects. These collaborations played a large role in Susie's practice of developing and sharing resources for community benefit.

In Groups

Susie's inclination to work with groups has been evident throughout her journey, beginning with her PhD on therapeutic and social support groups for women with breast cancer. Susie's role within her shared home in an ecovillage encapsulates community-led resource-collaboration; Susie assisted in conflict resolution as needed whilst also sharing her knowledge of the psychology of conflict resolution, supporting others to apply the model as it made sense in the community. As Susie explained:

[Conflict resolution skills] became a real feature of what we were all learning to do, share resources, share this space together and deal with people that wanted to have cats and dogs, which is where most of the conflict in intentional communities comes from apparently.

Whilst this was not a professional role, Susie used her knowledge in a way to support the community to have the skills it needed whilst avoiding assuming a hierarchical, expert position.

Collaboration within like-minded groups and teams has been a consistent and central component of Susie's professional practice, particularly with the Psychologists for Peace group and with the social issues department of the APS. While resource creation and sharing was a major component of Susie's work in these groups, these resources took a more expert position. This may have been related to the sources of the information (i.e. scientific literature), or the due to the broad nature of dissemination acting as a barrier to community collaboration. In this

work, Susie acted as a bridge between the “impenetrable scientific language” of research and the audience, who benefited from Susie’s skill in translating, simplifying, and disseminating resources that were previously largely inaccessible.

Values-Led Practice

Susie evidently lives and works in accordance with strong values. Her projects, therapeutic work, and ongoing professional connections with respected colleagues reflect guidance from her values: from a focus on peace, as explicitly identified by Susie, and from integrity, collaboration, courage, respect, sustainability, and hope for collective and ecological wellness. Collaboration and collective wellness are both identified as core values in community psychology (Kloos, Hill, Thomas, Case, Scott & Wandersman, 2020). Susie’s focus on collective and ecological wellness also relates to an argument posited by Prilleltensky (2001) that psychologists often pay greater attention to individual and relational wellness than collective wellness, and that this imbalance ought to be addressed through phases of praxis beyond reflection and research to incorporate social action. Susie also indicated her hopes that psychology as a discipline would continue to develop a greater focus on the potential for transformative change in the social issues space.

Susie’s strongly held value of peace influences both her professional practice and her activist relationships and methods of activism. The influence of this value in Susie’s work parallels the message conveyed in work by Rose (2004) – that too often actions of the present are excused in pursuit of an imagined ideal future, which then paradoxically becomes unattainable. While Rose wrote this specifically in relation to moral engagement with the ethics of decolonialism, the broader concept of *the ends justifying the means* is one that Susie has also explicitly countered as it relates to non-violent direct action, in line with the deeply held value of peace.

Sustaining Practice

Susie’s work has predominantly entailed working in the psychology of social issues that are important to her, particularly related to environmental psychology and climate change. Susie spoke of significant challenges in her practice, particularly in the face of the global and existential threat posed by the climate crisis. Susie’s discussion of being true to her values indicated that her values-led practice fosters a sense of meaning, motivation, and empowerment. Having these qualities in her professional roles serves to sustain her practice in the areas most important to her.

Informing Transitions

Susie spoke of key transition points in her career, and of her inclination to be guided by her values in determining her future steps. Susie would evaluate the values most important to her that she wanted most to uphold in her practice and her workplace and consider how she could shape her career to be true to these. In many instances this process involved competing values, which needed intense reflection and deliberation in a difficult decision-making process.

Reflections

In witnessing Susie’s oral history and in reflecting on the links to my own interests and questions, I consider my understanding and naming of this space as an intersection of community psychology and environmental psychology. Although Susie identifies herself as an environmental psychologist with general registration, I understand her environmental psychology practice as being informed by community psychology theories, frameworks, and approaches. A focus on resource-collaboration, values-led practice, and transformative change

of social issues are not inherent to environmental psychology, however have been crucial aspects of Susie's work.

An aspect that arose during this project for me was the unmaking and rebuilding of psychological contributions to communities from a collaborative and non-hierarchical standpoint, rather than from the expert vantage point. This arose particularly in Susie's discussions of her work creating resources for communities and providing community-led support. I am in the ongoing process of unlearning the expert role as psychology's default, and was reminded of my first community psychology placement, at Daughters of the West (a holistic health promotion program set in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia). Working in this community setting needed me to shift away from the expert role into something more helpful for that space. Through supervision and reflection I considered what the expert role can provide – and how as a provisional psychologist, in early career stages, the familiar structure of this expert role may act as a comforting guide for new practitioners who are uncertain or unfamiliar with other options. I found the intention and meaning in the decision to move away from this default expert approach to be crucial in balancing the discomfort of moving away from the familiar. In Susie's discussions of her varying experiences of sharing and developing resources, I was prompted to consider the importance of tailoring the approach to the situation and the community.

I find myself curious about the upwards- or downwards-orientation discussed by Susie, as in some ways this seems to reinforce hierarchy. However, this could also be an acknowledgement of contextualised differences in experience and knowledge. When speaking about the concept of being upwardly-oriented or downwardly-oriented, Susie said that people tend to identify with either one or the other, and encouraged me to consider my own preference. Initially I related to the upwardly-oriented experience that Susie described, as I also appreciate the opportunity to learn from people who are more established and that have the "teaching and inspiring" skills associated with being downwardly-oriented. This is potentially more related to my current environment and roles as a student and as a provisional psychologist on placement; I currently do not have many opportunities to work professionally with people in a teaching and inspiring capacity, and instead find my most influential professional relationships are with peers and supervisors who are equally or more established in community psychology than I am.

Given the importance of group collaborations in Susie's journey, I was reminded of Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological systems model (1979), which I considered in relation to Susie's work. It is apparent that Susie has found groups to be useful across multiple levels. When working with an individual, or in small group settings, Susie spoke about the considerations she gives to broader level influences, such as social support networks, the role of stressors of family and work life, and of cultural and planetary systems influences – particularly of climate change. Susie also works with these broader macrosystems as an explicit focus in producing resources and in advocating for positive social change. I found these links between theory and practice to be an interesting illustration of community and environmental psychology praxis, particularly due to the varying levels that Susie works in – an approach to practice which also resonates with me and my hopes for my future career.

Susie's discussion around the importance of finding the group Psychologists for the Prevention of War (Psychologists for Peace) indicates that this was a clear cornerstone of her career and prompted me to consider the importance of the people I am learning from in my current community psychology course. I consider myself fortunate to be making the connections and to have the opportunities for learning and practice that I do within community

psychology and I can see this being a similar cornerstone. Many of my colleagues have shared interests and approaches to psychology and I am hopeful that we will have similar longstanding relationships as Susie found in Psychologists for Peace.

Susie's practice was clearly informed by strongly held values such as sustainability, integrity, courage, respect, and peace. I reflect upon how my own journey in community psychology is emerging as informed by my own values, particularly relating to social justice and equity. Susie's recognition of the importance of collaboration also resonates with my hopes for my future practice and my preferred approach to learning and working. In considering how Susie used her values to inform key transition points, I can see the importance of clearly knowing and evaluating one's own values in a reflective and ongoing process, a learning which I am sure will also be important in my future work. I see the relationships between values-led practice and social change in community psychology as relating to a call by Cornish, Campbell and Montenegro (2018), for community psychology to embrace a politics of hope, rather than despair, as a part of reinvigorating community psychology's contribution to scholar-activism.

Conclusion

This project was immensely rewarding and valuable for exploring my interest and curiosity in community psychology and environmental psychology, and for considering the relevance to my own experiences and future practice. I have found witnessing and reflecting on Susie's oral history to be useful in understanding the ways in which people may navigate and create their psychological practice, whilst facilitating greater learning about my own ways of being and becoming a community psychologist. Through Susie's story, the prominent themes of resource-collaboration and values-led practice are an attestation to the influence of community psychology approaches in practice. These reflect Susie's valued collaborations, particularly with mentorship relationships and with groups, and reflect the role her values play in sustaining her practice and offering guidance in transition points. The role of connection and hope have been reinforced as central to mitigating burnout and stagnation whilst affirming the role of the scholar-activist/resource-collaborator. Susie's approaches to her practice resonate strongly with how I hope to practice in the future, across multiple social-ecological levels and in areas where community psychology can contribute to transformative change in social issues. I am hopeful that in working in a values-driven way in environmental psychology, as Susie has done, I will be able to support healthy and just communities in ways that are meaningful to me personally and professionally.

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