Unpacking stored and storied knowledge: elicited biographies of activism in mental health

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The changing nature of community activism and infrastructure in Manchester, UK and Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

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Core aims & design of the wider study

To explore the shift between urban government and urban governance focusing on VCS experiences of partnership working in Manchester and Auckland; the effectiveness of these partnerships; and whether VCS actors viewed these as key sites through which to influence change. (survey and interviews)

To examine how the national political environment shapes developments at the local level; extent to which state actors engage with activists; and how, relationship between activism and the state may be shifting [interviews N=]

To gain insight into the experiences and career trajectories of recent and current activists. [activist biographies N=46]

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<th>Phase 1</th>
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<td>Postal survey to all voluntary organisations in and operating in the fields of mental health and community safety.</td>
<td>interviews with voluntary organisations operating in fields of mental health and community safety.</td>
<td>interviews with key statutory sector actors from local, regional, national government.</td>
<td>biographical narratives from activists operating in the fields of mental health and community safety.</td>
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‘...what kind of struck me was the number of young people I was actually seeing who had been labelled as problems but actually had, were suffering from kind of depression, anxiety which was actually not being picked up. This sort of built up on my questions really... from that I made a decision to go and work in the voluntary sector, because I really wanted to make a difference.’ [UK ABI 01]
‘the robustness of the voluntary sector, being able to have a critical voice around services was actually being dampened. That it was becoming increasingly impossible to actually get involved and to campaign around the issues that you were picking up as a service delivery organisation and that you stood a real, real risk of the city council - [name] was a very controlling city council (they’ll probably kill me for saying this) but, it was very simple, if you decide to lobby councillors etc. and make an issue of this, you will actually end up losing your funding. It was as crude as that. So we had to back down. I think it was that point that I made the decision to go back in the statutory sector because I thought I’m not going to be able to change anything, I’m going to be outside knocking on walls and doors, that nobody’s going to take down… and maybe part of the structure, part of what I need to do, is actually go inside the system, learn the way the system works and learn how you manoeuvre your way round the system, but try to create change from the inside.’ [UK ABI 01]
‘I was actually starting to get quite burnt out, because I was working a very demanding job, and I was also kind of spending a lot of time volunteering in the community, being on management committees and having to take quite a lot of responsibility for some of the community-based work I did. Because very often people who came into those organisations, particularly the stuff around mental well-being and stuff around young people, were people who actually genuinely wanted to make change in their communities but didn’t necessarily have the skills and knowledge around systems. And so I felt I had a responsibility. So my activism took a slightly different turn. Rather than seeing it purely as campaigning, part of what I saw my activism as was about working alongside people, and skilling people up and also talking to people about how we actually manage to influence things, how you work through systems, because I had that kind of knowledge about stuff’
‘What I learned from the statutory sector which was very useful, was systems and how systems work. I also learned how you try to influence change that if you’re out in the community your access, for example, to members, to councillors, is very different from when you’re an officer in the council. And I also learned how to use language and how to use language in a much more sophisticated way. So it was not about doing ‘this needs to happen because of’, but it’s about finding the buzzwords and learning how to manipulate those buzzwords in order to get what you want’.
‘that was quite a significant step for me because I was quite purist and naïve in my politics, which was… you know, you make a stand, you do what you want, if you’re part of a system you just end up colluding and compromising core parts of yourself.’

‘I came to a point where I thought okay something’s going to give here now, because I sometimes take this moral high ground, I can be very purist in the good and the bad and the right and the wrong kind of stuff, and I thought for my own sanity I needed to come back into the voluntary sector’.
‘the issue that people could actually do that to other human beings and get away with it and so you know I suppose it was a sort of there was a key a key factor in terms of moving me away perhaps from just purely concentration upon individuals and their needs to sort of the wider framework of society and its really gone on from there in many ways.’

‘I needed to be part of changing some of those. So it’s seem to me activism is about changing the things that impact on the life of a person, and I think that’s about having a world view of what sort of society that you’re after in a sense - I mean I think that’s what keeps you alive that’s what keeps you going is a bigger vision about what you’re actually doing. [NZ ABI 07]
‘I wouldn’t necessarily describe my role or my work or reason for being in this part of the sector as relating back to activism. So it’s not a word that has resonance with me.

….after a few years I guess I thought - I can continue to do this and I can provide steady and good support to people and wherever possible help people to get back on track or feel that they’re in a position to start reclaiming their life and move forward, but also I felt like I was not in a position to be able to bring about more substantial change. And for me I guess that was the catalyst to look at starting to move into different roles and attempt to try to shift either practice in a more systemic way within an organisation and shift philosophy and thinking, policy, all those kinds of things.  [NZ ABI 19]
‘what suddenly started to happen was we were starting to respond with all our social services to a whole lot of changes which came about through new managerialism, economic sort of changes, the market economy... the people we’d worked with in other organisations we were suddenly competitors with - all trying to win contracts and adjusting to a contracting environment and a whole new business model. So a lot of a lot of energy went in internally at that stage to try and desperately respond to all of these changes going on in the government and I think took us away from that sort of external activism to a more internal activism about what was going on for our own organisations rather than what was going on for the people we were working with in some ways. …So I think it is a very important thing to actually keep reading the environment and making changes and trying think ahead ...where are you going to have to go in the future if you’re going to actually make an impact….’ [NZ ABI 07]
‘….behind the place where I was training there was four houses and in each of the houses there was, I suppose, about fifteen or sixteen alcoholics …and there was a sort of prominent member of the [place] community renting these houses and …he collected their benefits straight to his account and …they would come to his office each day and he would pay them out a little bit of money, so he was essentially just keeping them quietly drunk and alcoholic and essentially killing them really over the long term ‘cos they never had to seek treatment. And he was charging a huge amount for these houses. I remember on one morning an ambulance coming and the ambulance driver asked me to help him in this house, and there in the corner of one of the rooms was a guy who was a bag of bones really, who used to be a human being, and we put him onto the stretcher and as we were carrying him down the stairs he died and regardless of his own addiction and responsibility for that addiction there was a whole lot of other aspects that were happening, that in terms of a legal framework that allowed that to occur …there was the issue that people could actually do that to other human beings and get away with it. I suppose it was a key factor in terms of moving me away perhaps from just purely concentrating upon individuals and their needs to sort of the wider framework of society and its really gone on from there in many ways.’ [NZ ABI 07]
'one of the things about being in a geographically defined community, is your ability to create active networks is a lot stronger. You know people, you know the car going down the road, you can stop at the supermarket and have a chat about things. It was also a community which had a… it was a place where people who were strong and independent thinkers gravitated to. It was a place where people had been marginalised went. ….And it had its own local government, and that local government was probably the most colourful exercise in local government in the country you know….So it had a strong tradition. It was the first place in the world to declare itself nuclear free. It was the first place in the world to declare itself GE free, and those were more than just symbolic gestures. The protest fleet that went to Moruroa was largely sourced from [place].'

[NZ ABI 18]
Concluding Comments

- autobiographical narrative allowed people to speak out of role in way that allowed them to range freely across time and space (but cannot be seen as definitive accounts);
- to fully understand larger story of societal shifts & organisational change, need micro stories of people’s trials and trajectories & vice versa;
- holding both in balance allowed us to give credence to how knowledge is gained and used in the ‘cross sectoral dance’ that allows people to move between positions of aspirational influence;
- BUT central paradox - can we condense a story without violating the inherent narrative?