Mike Fox and the poverty tourists

Mike Fox, Campaign Against Poverty, and **Penny Priest**, Shropshire

The UK Critical and Community Psychology Conference happened in the same week that James Naughtie could be heard poking fun at a spokesperson for 'Anti-Tourism' on Radio 4's 'Today' programme. Anti-tourism, it seems, is critical of the focus and activities of mainstream tourism. So, for example, instead of going to Paris and taking a photo of the Eiffel Tower, the anti-tourist goes to the Eiffel Tower, stands in front of it, and takes a picture of everything but the Eiffel Tower, of the alternative perspective. Some of the presenters at the Critical and Community Psychology Conference had similar suggestions about psychology research.

tourist n. **1.a**. a person who travels for pleasure, usually sightseeing and staying in hotels.

David Fryer gave the example of research he was commissioned to do, to examine how people with disabilities could be helped to adapt better to their work environment. He turned the agenda around, focusing instead on the people who had commissioned him to do this work and how they might change in order to better accommodate the needs of their employees. Jim Orford described research into aspects of the New Deal for Communities initiative. One method of investigation was photo-elicitation, which involved focus group collaborators taking photographs of their communities to illustrate issues raised in the group. They then re-grouped and discussed the photos. This way of working helped to add more weight and substance to their views.

What the presenters and the anti-tourist have in common is that none of them are part of the picture being viewed. They are all tourists. They might be trying to look at something in a different way from everybody else, but ultimately they are all looking at something they are not part of. They do not necessarily include themselves in the picture, although conference delegates might argue that they would urge their discipline to include themselves in the picture. In contrast, Mike Fox came to present his own views and experience of poverty and exclusion, a picture that he is part of. In some ways, I guess he too was a tourist, of a different kind, looking in on a gathering of people critical of mainstream psychology.

At this point it is important to say that Mike described himself as 'not one for writing', preferring to do the talking, but he was happy for me to do some writing on his behalf. The following is therefore a mixture of Mike's contributions and my own reflections on these, with reference to the conference.

The importance of our identities

All delegates were provided with name tags: green ones for the organisers (members of the West Midlands Critical and Community Psychology Interest Group) and white ones for everyone else. People chose at various points to identify themselves in others ways, typically by where and with whom they worked. Some felt the need to give themselves labels, saying 'I'm a social constructionist' or 'I'm a critical realist'. The vast majority were various types of psychologists. A fundamental part of Mike's presentation was the way he described his own identity, how it had been shaped by his experiences and how that provided him with both similar and different viewpoints on subjects discussed in the conference. In doing this, he showed clearly how our identities interact with what we see and what we want to look at by virtue of the vantage point we have. Mike cautioned that 'for you [psychologists] to help people, you've got to understand them, and to understand them you've got to know where they're coming from.'

Mike was born and bred in Liverpool. He left school at 15 and went into the building trade, first as an apprentice tiler, and then as a plasterer's labourer. Following redundancies, he drifted down to London to find work. He spent the

next 10 years 'following the work' and jumping from job to job, moving back and forth between Liverpool and London. He returned to Liverpool and the building trade in 1982, and has lived there ever since.

Mike was made redundant six years ago and has not been in paid work since. He used his redundancy pay to keep up his mortgage repayments, but his house was repossessed after five years when it ran out. Mike is now a committed member of various local and national groups concerned with addressing poverty. He has been director of Communities Against Poverty in Liverpool for two years and is one of the first trained presidents of the St Vincent de Paul Society, a Catholic organisation that seeks to help those who are suffering in some way. Mike is also an active member of the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP), which is an alliance of anti-poverty groups, from community, voluntary and statutory sectors. UKCAP was involved in setting up the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty (www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmparty/memi314.htm), which gives people experiencing poverty the opportunity to question Ministers directly.

Mike explained one of the reasons for his involvement in all these groups:

> Being in building work, we have an idea of how you get rid of stress. It's called swearing at each other. So when you're on a building site, if anyone upsets you, you call them every name under the sun, throw a few bricks up in the air and hit something with a spade. Ten minutes later you say, 'Are you going to the pub later?' and they say, 'I might do.' And you do … because you've released the power point … [But] when you're unemployed and on benefits, the only way you can get the frustration out is by coming to meet the people that actually think they know what the problem is.

So Mike was eager to come and meet us. He criticised the information I had sent him about the conference:

> This leaflet about your conference … was typical of the establishment. The words … mean nothing to people on the street, but actually mean something to you because you understand the meaning of the words … I know the words because I looked them up in the dictionary.

He wanted to speak to us because he had been led to believe that psychologists 'only sort out psychological problems.' He was surprised that psychologists would be interested in people living on a low income. 'I've been all over the establishment and I've never met a psychologist.' Mike's experience shows how, despite all the research linking poverty with health inequalities (e.g. Wilkinson, 1996), this evidence is simply not being heard. At the level of committee member, activist and spokesperson, Mike was seeing poverty as one thing, and psychological problems as another, with no relationship between them.

Mike's own experience makes the relationship explicit. He was OK for the first 12 months of unemployment, but the second year was not so good for him. After 29 years of work he began to feel he was being treated as a scrounger. He became 'a very serious, obnoxious and angry person' with his 'choices taken away' from him. He started to question his identity, asking 'Is it me? Have I changed?'

Mike described the reality of becoming invisible. Typically, he experienced problems with benefits. He had to wait until his house was repossessed and he was homeless before he was rehoused, and as a consequence lost his furniture as he had nowhere to store it. Less typically, being a single, white male with a mortgage, he 'didn't fit into any category'.

At the same time as being invisible to the Benefits Agency, he became less visible to the people around him. He explained how, due to his being out of work, gradually 'People begin to forget about you. You start to doubt that your network of solidarity actually exists.' Interestingly, a new identity has emerged for Mike through his work against poverty, yet he pointed out the incongruity of him being on an interview panel appointing somebody to a job with a £30k salary whilst he receives £57 a week on benefits.

How unified are our interests?

'Solidarity' came up in the opening presentation of the conference by David Smail, with one suggestion that solidarity is sometimes the only sort of power people have. When it was time for

questions, Mike wanted to challenge him on the idea of solidarity, but his raised hand wasn't seen. He was invisible again. He told me afterwards about his problem with solidarity, about how solidarity is illusory. He argued that solidarity is not a kind of 'collective power of individuals'. There may indeed be 'power in a union', but in Mike's experience as a shop steward, such collectives are influenced by the powerful voices of just a few people. 'Solidarity', he said, 'is the isolation of the individual.' There are always those whose voices are never heard, who are afraid to speak and who are not listened to, whose voices, for a whole range of reasons, are simply not as powerful as others.

Mike has experienced not being seen, not being heard, not being acknowledged, but he is certainly not afraid to speak. In fact, he seems driven to speak because of this. He told us how he shouts in meetings and people say, 'It's all right, we can hear you', to which he responds, 'I know, and so can the people at the back hear me!' Not only does he shout, but he also goes 'direct to the root of all evil'. He goes straight to parliament, taking questions on behalf of others. When people get a reply it 'means more to them than getting the problem solved, because for the first time in their lives somebody has actually acknowledged that they've got a problem'.

In some ways, Mike operates in a way that is almost the antithesis of solidarity. He is the champion of the individual. He speaks as an individual, on behalf of other individuals. To him, all establishments, all collectives, all systems are problematic. He knows from his own experience that 'the system is not there for the individual. It's there for a column block and if you fall out of that column, you won't be part of the system any more.' When Mike said, 'Once people are in the system, they'll learn the system,' he wasn't talking about people on benefits. He was talking about people like psychologists, politicians, doctors, teachers, and how they become consumed by the system that created them. And yet at the same time, Mike recognised the need to try and be part of some system: 'I realised that the only way I was going to get anywhere was by joining the groups available to me.'

Mike's challenge to the idea of solidarity closely reflects the tensions I witnessed between the Critical and Community Psychology Conference delegates. Within that particular collective, there were people whose voices were heard more than others. We all listened to presenters who were mostly there by right of the kudos associated with their names. The gathering also had that quality of solidarity being illusory, with obvious divisions between 'critical realists' and 'social constructionists.' There was also uneasiness about people becoming too comfortable and safe in the realms of a kind of communal subversion. Rather than becoming settled in this cosy place, Mike urged us to put our energies into involvement with groups outside of psychology, helping people like him promote change at higher levels. For example, instead of adding to the bulging research evidence on poverty and health inequalities, we could put lobbying groups in touch with the existing research.

Our interest in solidarity was mainly expressed in terms of how difficult it sometimes is to be critical of mainstream ideologies. We were interested in the solidarity among ourselves, not in the potential power of the solidarity of those people we were sharing photographs of, those people experiencing poverty. We were just visiting and, like most tourists, we had money in our wallets. Mike arrived at the conference without a penny in his.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Suzanne Elliot for her post-it notes.

Reference

Wilkinson, R. (1996). *Unhealthy societies: The afflictions of inequality.* London: Routledge.

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Mobility of clinical psychologists

The following clinical psychology departments have indicated that they are willing to be approached with enquiries about vacancies which may arise over the next year.

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