"Shotgun partnership": a systems-centered® case study analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – This case study explores the relationship between identity and locality in two groups of young people from different environments working with a community artist to explore representations and perceptions about their environment, culminating in an exchange visit. The paper explores the challenges and complexities of partnership working in community regeneration in order to move beyond prevalent idealised views of partnership as a policy tool.

Design/methodology/approach – The multi-method qualitative evaluation included filming, direct observations of project sessions and interviews with key professionals. A systems analysis was then conducted using the Systems-Centered (SCT) framework (Agazarian, 1997; Gantt and Agazarian 2006; 2007).

Findings – The extent to which multi-agency partnerships in community regeneration are likely to be effective and sustainable is related to the development of the partnership systems. Shared goals, clear roles and a common understanding of the context of the collaborative work are critical for developing multi-agency systems.

Practical implications – This paper highlights the complex issues that need to be addressed when working with young people on issues of identity and territory. It also presents a systems viewpoint on partnership that has wider policy and practice implications for multi-agency partnerships.

Originality/value – Drawing on a systems-centered perspective, the paper expands our conceptual understanding of multi-agency partnerships to seeing such partnerships as dynamic living human systems, which can then be understood in terms of the variables that affect their functioning and effectiveness. This provides a tool for analysis and reflection on partnership that is of value to both academics/researchers and managers/practitioners.

Keywords: Multi-agency partnerships; Systems-Centered; Community regeneration; Well-being; Sustainability

Paper type: Case study

Introduction

Our goal in writing the article was to see if viewing a case study of a multi-agency regeneration partnership from a systems-centered theory (SCT) perspective (and its theory of a living human systems (Agazarian, 1997) perspective) enabled new insights and offered new ways of working in such contexts.

The project in question involved arts-based work, facilitated by a community artist, with two community-based youth groups. The aim of the project was to create a space for young people to create art that reflected on their local environment, their relationships with other members of the group and their place within their community. It was designed to be of benefit to the young people by giving them access to an experienced artist, art supplies, and a space in which to be reflective and creative. This was coupled with a desire to broaden their horizons by enabling participants to experience other, different environments and connect with other young people within them, After the initial sessions in their separate localities there was an exchange visit between the two groups of young people, organised by the university based researchers, in collaboration with other university partners and the youth workers from the respective youth groups.

The project was part of a suite of projects funded by "Urban Regeneration: Making a Difference" (an initiative which in turn was principally funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE). This initiative broadened the scope of traditional urban regeneration (focusing on land renewal and property development) and was designed to address "key urban regeneration challenges" in the north of England around themes of crime, community cohesion, health and well-being, and enterprise. Some quality art work was produced in the sessions, but the exchange visit proved to be difficult and inadvertently elicited a territorial defensiveness among the young people.

In producing the article three members of the Psychosocial Research Unit (PRU) and a collaborator working from an SCT perspective reflected on the experience using Weick's (1995, p. 17) notion of sense-making as a retrospective, social process of ongoing meaning making, 'driven by plausibility rather than accuracy'. We met at a dissemination event in which PRU members presented some of the key difficulties they had encountered during the data-collection phase of the project. We were curious to see if an SCT framework could shed any light on how things unfolded and the experiences of the researchers. We have detailed both successful and less successful elements of the project. This is not intended as a criticism of individuals: from an SCT viewpoint, the work that is done in any team is more a product of the *system itself*, not just the result of personal successes or shortcomings. We also know how much easier it is to reflect and consider alternative courses of action when we are through something than when we are in the thick of it.

The article is organised as follows: a summary of the theory of living human systems and SCT is next. This is followed by a summary of the project, then a review of what SCT offers to make sense of how the project unfolded before, in the final section, the authors' conclusions.

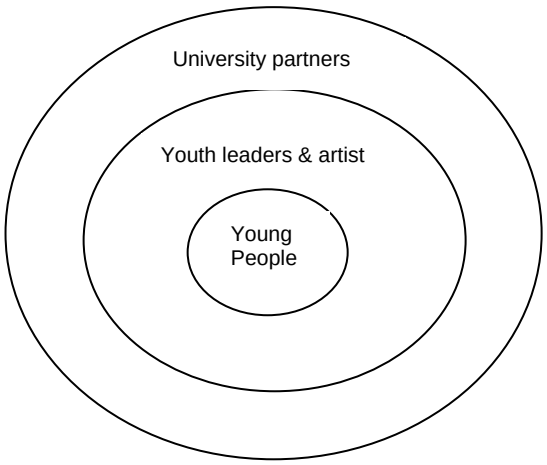
What is systems-centered theory?

A theory of living human systems and its systems-centered practice has been applied in organisations, education, clinically and in personal development. The project to be analysed in this article contained particularly pertinent issues for an SCT-informed analysis, as it involved a variety of partner organisations from university and community settings, as well as participants from different geographical areas, coming together to work on issues of inclusion and exclusion.

SCT was developed by Yvonne Agazarian and, as an integrative theory, it draws on a range of approaches to change and psychological well-being including Lewin's (1951) field theory, von Bertalanffy's (1968) general systems theory, group dynamics (Bennis and Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1959; Foulkes, 1965), communications theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1964), mind-body (Damasio, 1994) and short term dynamic psychotherapy (Davanloo, 1987). Key ideas and concepts of relevance to this article are outlined below.

- Living human systems "survive, develop and transform through discriminating and integrating differences, differences in the apparently similar and similarities in apparently different" (Gantt and Agazarian, 2006, p. 14). As humans we tend to react to differences that are too different by scapegoating, trying to convert or dismissing them. [1]
  Building a team, project or organisation that legitimises differences and sees them as offering potentially useful information can make a radical difference to using the different resources and information in the team and consequently lead to more productive and satisfying work.
- Systems in context. SCT looks at any system in the context of the system above and below it. In the project explored in this article, the university partners were the context for the youth leaders and the artist working with the young people; the youth leaders and the artist, in turn, were the context for the young people (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. Systems in context



Of course there were many other levels too. For example, the young people exist in the context of their different local environments. Which group of three sub-systems one chooses to focus on depends on what one is trying to understand or change. SCT posits that working with the middle system – in this case the youth leaders and artist – is the one where one is likely to have most impact as it has boundaries with the system above and the system below.

- Isomorphy. Based on von Bertalanffy (1968), the SCT notion of isomorphy posits that what one learns about one part of the system may shed light on the way other parts of the system are working. Specifically, isomorphy means that different levels in the system are likely to be similar in structure (the way information crosses from one sub-system to another) and function (the way they deal with similarities and differences and are able to integrate these). This is similar to the psychodynamic concept of mirroring or parallel process where two or more human systems in relationship are influenced by one another (Alderfer, 1987, p. 210).
- Role, goal and context. SCT works with this framework (Agazarian and Gantt, 2005; Gantt and Agazarian 2006) to highlight the notion that every context has a goal. Being mindful of the goal and bringing in behaviours that are likely to support this goal (building on Lewin's (1951) idea of a field of force), means we have a better chance of taking up our roles functionally in our different contexts. So the starting point for building a system is to begin to clarify role, goal and context, a process that will be revisited continuously as the system develops and the context changes.
- The force-field as a tool to diagnose and change the system dynamics. Building on Lewin's (1951) notion that in any system there will be behaviours (driving forces) that move toward the goal and restraining forces that move away from it and which are in balance at any point in time to keep the system stable, SCT focuses on weakening the restraining forces. This automatically releases the driving forces towards the system development (Agazarian 1997; Gantt and Agazarian 2006).

We have used the SCT notions – particularly of isomorphy, role, goal and context and the force-field – in our reflection, analysis and writing.

The project

Context

The subject of this article is an arts-based project with two youth groups in socially deprived areas in the north of England. The young people attending both youth groups were identified by various project partners to be at risk of offending and/or being socially excluded. The Urban Regeneration: Making a Difference project (funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE) formed a partnership between four northern universities. Staff were invited to bid for funding to organise research or knowledge transfer projects.

As a prerequisite for funding, each project had to involve at least two of the partner universities, in collaboration with other local or regional agencies. PRU decided to bid for funding as part of its ongoing work in arts-based projects in community settings. An added

incentive for PRU was to continue to fund the posts of contract researchers. PRU's original university partner withdrew from the collaborative bid three weeks before the final deadline. The arts unit from another university was approached and agreed to join PRU in the partnership instead.

Initial meetings between PRU and the arts unit to put together the bid were enthusiastic and enabled the construction of a project plan and research protocol that led to a successful bid. The deadline only allowed for three meetings to refine a rather complex project design which ideally would have required more groundwork.

By drawing on pre-existing networks, the partnership now had access to two youth groups, each posing distinctive regeneration challenges, and each with significant populations of vulnerable young people. One of these groups known to PRU was from a semi-rural area of run-down estates surrounded by countryside. The other group, contacted through the arts unit, was situated in the midst of decaying, urban inner-city estates.

The arts unit recruited an experienced community artist to work on a weekly basis for a month with each youth group. The two groups of youth leaders had not met each other before the project began and there was no prior discussion between them of what they were trying to achieve and how to take up their roles. An attempt to bring them together failed with youth workers citing other work pressures and commitments. The artist was to help the groups find ways to explore and artistically represent their feelings about their respective environments. The culmination of the projects was to be two exchange visits in which each group hosted the other and introduced them to the place where they lived.

Goals

The brief of the project was for the community artist to work with a variety of art forms with the two youth groups in parallel, in their own facilities. Specifically, the goals were to: provide arts projects for young people at risk of offending in two contrasting localities; produce arts outputs from participants that reflected how they saw themselves in relation to their local environments; enable exchange visits between the two groups of young people to share learning experiences; and build collaboration between university partners and community organisations.

The design of the project was that each group, having spent four weeks exploring and artistically representing the distinctive nature of their localities, would have the opportunity to host the other group to explore differences and commonalities.

PRU and the arts unit attempted to convene meetings without success to bring the groups together to clarify these goals after the bid was approved. In retrospect, it would have been a good idea to explore other ways of enabling communication and planning at this level. The tasks that remained to be accomplished were clarification of respective roles, agreement on the goals of the project and discussion as to how to facilitate an open, communicative, welcoming exchange between the two groups of young people. It would have been an opportunity to highlight the sharply-defined territorial identities of the young people and their very limited experience of places different from their own. It would also have been an opportunity to highlight the possibility that the two groups of young people would encounter each other as alien rather than relating to the things they held in common.

Roles

The project was managed by the PRU director, with the arts unit responsible for organisational and administrative issues, including liaising with the youth group leaders to negotiate venues/dates etc. PRU researchers were responsible for evaluating the project. As indicated above, there were areas where roles were not directly clarified with participants, particularly at the crucial middle-level of the system: the youth workers.

Methods

The main data sources were video recordings of the sessions, images of the work produced by the art groups photographed by the artist and ethnographic observation from the research team. The PRU researchers focussed on interactions between the art groups and the artist and, in the case of the exchange visits, on the interactions between the semi-rural and the urban group. Attention was paid to the commentary between the young people while they worked, during the exchange visit and on the journey to and from the event. This was recorded both in note form and on video for subsequent analysis.

The artistic output from the two groups afforded both "ideal" and "realist" representations of the environments in which the young people lived. In addition, the PRU researchers conducted interviews with staff and the artist in order to gain access to their perceptions of how the young people had responded to the project and each other.

The data was analysed and synthesised in interpretive panels of four to five, including but not restricted to the people who had collected it. This ensured a variety of perspectives on the material under consideration, with the panel working through the data until consensus was reached. Speech was analysed thematically to understand the salient issues affecting the young people's perceptions of place. The virtue of video, however, is that it records behaviours which might otherwise be missed in the analysis of talk-based data. This proved to be invaluable in the case of the exchange visits where ambivalences and hostilities were enacted through body language and acting out.

Members of the team then met to conduct a retrospective evaluation using an SCT framework (Agazarian, 1997; Gantt and Agazarian 2006; 2007). The outcome of that analysis is recorded and discussed below.

The work of the project

The project went ahead on schedule largely due to the organisational skills of the arts unit. The artist worked with both groups in parallel once a week over a month culminating in two exchange visits between the young people. Although the projects ran relatively smoothly, communication difficulties across sites emerged very quickly. For example, the first day of the semi-rural intervention turned out to be on the same day as a gala in the local town and none of the young people came. The arts unit told the PRU researchers after the session that they were unaware that this gala might have been a hindrance to the initial session, whereas the semi-rural youth group leader indicated that the dates had been imposed externally by the arts unit. The urban-based project went ahead as planned. This

meant the projects were immediately out of phase and that the urban-based cohort had an extra session with the artist.

At the end of the individual project sessions a variety of art was produced from both areas. The artist was able to elicit reflections from the young people in both cohorts, verbally through informal discussion and through the artwork they chose to create. He initially concentrated on the likes and dislikes of the young people concerning their local area. The urban-based young people talked of desires for parks with wildlife, water and play areas - parks that were 'less scruffy'. This discussion led one girl to draw a cityscape that she described as 'bright, colourful and happy…not based on a real place'. Another drew a landscape that merged the fantasy of an attractive local environment in the foreground which she described as 'happy' with a realistic and recognisable backdrop of the local city skyline, which she described as 'frightening and sad'.

In the semi-rural group, the artist also asked the young people to draw something related to their local environment and explored this with the participants as they worked on their images. Although their area was surrounded by countryside, the young people did not appreciate this and the general consensus was that the area was 'boring'. Things they did not like included: dog mess, litter, fast cars and graffiti. When asked about what improvements they would make to the local area, the girls said they would like a new swimming pool with diving boards.

What emerged from the sessions at both locations was that despite the differences in the areas, the young people shared many views of their respective environments. They had criticisms of their areas as falling short of their ideal and expressed a desire for change. It was hoped that they would share these views in the next phase: the exchange events.

The exchange events

The sessions in individual sites ran smoothly for the most part. We have chosen to focus on the exchange phase of the project in order to gain a better understanding of some of the more problematic issues around working with and integrating differences.

The exchanges illustrate the difficulties of multi-agency working at their most acute. The idea behind the exchanges emerged from previous work with young people undertaken by the arts unit, in which they had successfully enabled a cultural exchange between disadvantaged youth groups. The exchanges in this project were also intended as a way for the young people from each group to display their art work. Respective Staff groups were briefed and prepared for the exchanges among themselves but by the time of the exchanges there had still been no direct discussion between them as to how to achieve this goal successfully. The young people were prepared for the exchanges by the artist and in the first exchange he made a concerted effort to engage the groups with each other and, in his words, 'make them see that they had a lot of common concerns, despite the differences in where they lived'.

The arts unit organised a coach to take the urban-based young people to the semi-rural youth group's facilities. Four urban-based girls showed up, roughly a third of the usual attendance. They had been prepared for the practicalities of the journey by the artist and

arts unit. However, a sense of apprehension from the girls was palpable on the outgoing journey. Upon arrival at the venue, the interaction between the two groups was minimal. Only girls turned up from the semi-rural group also. The urban-based girls went into a corner of the room and looked sullen. The semi-rural youth group leader attempted an ice-breaking game which was ineffective – the adults contributing far more than the young people. The urban-based girls soon disappeared *en masse* to the toilets.

The artist managed to organise a group circle discussion about the girls' local areas. He commented that some had been very articulate about such issues during the art work sessions. They remained noticeably withdrawn in this context. Finally, the girls were taken to a local reservoir. This idea was introduced by the youth team staff and agreed with the arts unit. This was at odds with the original concept of reflecting on the young people's experience of their local areas. The reservoir was an area of outstanding natural beauty that the urban-based girls described as 'posh' and it seemed to reinforce in them their sense of difference by introducing a natural setting which they would normally find inaccessible.

The semi-rural group's youth workers tried hard to integrate the groups of girls but they remained in their cliques. By the time they had walked around the reservoir and returned to their coaches, some of the semi-rural girls were singing a territorial and triumphalist rugby song about their local town that saw the urban-based girls eager to get back on the coach home. On the return journey, they complained about the lack of hospitality of the semi-rural girls.

The second exchange was due to take place in the youth centre of the urban-based group, but a decision was made to hold the event on the arts unit's university campus. Some accounts suggest that this was a decision made by the girls, perhaps because they were embarrassed or ashamed of their facilities. However, it was always intended to close the project with a brief "graduation" ceremony at this location. Once again, only girls from either cohort came to the event.

The artist had made a pencil collage on a large piece of canvas of many of the pieces of artwork made during the project. He brought with him a large selection of paints and his idea was for the group as a whole to colour it in during the day. A few of the semi-rural group obliged but the urban-based group did not participate. The group were taken to a Victorian museum where they appeared at their most engaged, dressing up in Victorian garb. As with the previous exchange, this choice of venue was not representative of the local environment.

The day culminated in the graduation organised by the arts unit. As the name suggests, the girls donned robes and received a symbolic scroll, whilst they individually had their photograph taken for posterity. The girls seemed bemused by this process. Although it had been explained to them throughout the project, their lack of frame of reference possibly meant that they had not really understood the nature of the event. The artist later commented on the difficulties of the "exchange":

> Once the exchange happened, I think it took us all by surprise…how negative the reaction was from the various parties…and from my point of view, it became really hard in the two exchange sessions to do anything creative with them…because I

> probably naively thought that they would come together and they would certainly work together in the same space, but they didn't even want to do that.

What emerged was that the young people were only able to critically appraise their own "place" when secure within it. When taken into an unfamiliar environment, they became defensive of their own territories, and critical of the environment of the "other" project. It appeared that whatever the shortcomings of the places they lived in, these localities provided the basis for a territorial identity which they defended when they felt themselves to be at a disadvantage.

What helped and what got in the way of the project working

For this article, we have tried to constructively make sense of the intelligible failures [2] of the project. The intention has been to analyse these systemically instead of laying the blame on individuals who from a systems-centered view are governed by the system.

One of the ways to achieve this is to do a force-field analysis of the main driving and restraining forces. As mentioned earlier, the force-field is based on Lewin's (1951) notion of forces that move towards and away from a given goal and that keep the system stable. Lewin posited that it is easier to weaken the restraining forces in order to release the driving forces than it is to increase the driving forces. The force-field (Table 1) focuses on what helped and what got in the way of the project achieving its goals of working with difference. We have divided the project into three distinct phases: the initial planning, the organisation of the arts sessions, and the concluding exchange visits and writing up of the project findings.

Table 1. Force-field analysis

PLANNING

DRIVING FORCES **What helped the project work well→**	**RESTRAINING FORCES** **←What got in the way of working well**
Active choice to go for money; PRU and the arts unit → acknowledged the "shotgun" partnership Regeneration programme aligned with PRU's and the → arts unit's interests Both units approached it with energy and enthusiasm →	← Pressure of completion within a year ← First university partner dropped out three weeks before bid approval deadline ← PRU felt exasperated and pressured by this action
PRU influenced by the fact that jobs were at stake → which gave a sense of urgency and willingness to work through the conditions and constraints of the programme	← The urgency meant some project design elements were insufficiently thought through by both partners
PRU and the arts unit shared overall goals for the → project and very quickly put together a working partnership. We felt hopeful and relieved	← More time was spent negotiating the bid than arriving at mutual understanding about how best to work with the young people

ORGANISATION

DRIVING FORCES **What helped the project work well→**	**RESTRAINING FORCES** **←What got in the way of working well**
Prior working relations with community partners → allowed the project to get off the ground rapidly	← Not being able to get around non-negotiable deadlines by funders which would have allowed time needed to build relationships and attend to process
Youth workers facilitated the artist's and researchers' → introduction to the young people	← Universities tried to manage communication without resolving confusion over practical arrangements
Relief that roles, goals and context were at first easily → clarified between university partners and appeared straightforward	← Roles, goal and contexts were not subsequently revisited and refined with youth group leaders responsible for front-line work with young people
Prior PRU experience and regular review meetings → allowed PRU researchers to voice misgivings with each other	← PRU did not have similar reflective conversations with the community partners. The youth workers did not come to planning meetings and exerted little authority during the art-work phase
The artist had excellent relational skills and helped the → young people represent the links between their identity and environment. He created a containing and thoughtful atmosphere	← The artist was not as well supported by other workers during the exchange visit and in this context was unable to generate a similar level of reflective discussion
Young people demonstrated willingness to engage and → make an effort in the arts sessions	← Severe time constraints meant lack of communication between project team and young people about the design: hence mixed attendance and ambivalence about exchange visit

EXCHANGE AND WRITE-UP

DRIVING FORCES **What helped the project work well→**	**RESTRAINING FORCES** **←What got in the way of working well**
Exchange visits were welcomed by some girls as an opportunity to show what their lives were like to others from a different area →	← Youth leaders were unable to counter defensive territorialism on exchange visit and unwittingly amplified it by supporting territorial rugby songs
Youth workers and university partners took time and made efforts to be on hand →	
PRU's relationship with the arts unit has endured, as have relationships with local community groups, leading to confidence that difficulties can be weathered and relationships can remain intact →	← Some blaming and complaining exacerbated by the fact that not everyone knew one another
Virtue of emergent working was recognised: anxieties at unexpected difficulties were contained allowing the team to creatively "muddle through" and produce a "good-enough" outcome →	← The "command and control" organisation of the regeneration programme as a whole meant that deadlines and designs were inflexible ← Monitoring of the project performance by the funder consumed time and energy and was a source of administrative frustration for the research team who wanted to devote more time to analysing data
Writing this article has allowed PRU to maintain "researcher distant" curiosity about an intriguing and perplexing project. This has enabled a reflective stance and learning →	← PRU was at times drawn into blaming individuals and the wider system for deficiencies, thus mirroring dynamics within the project itself

As discussed, the project was in many ways difficult and challenging. What helped overall were the good relations and goodwill between the university partners, the willingness of the youth group leaders and young people to become involved and the artist's leadership. Within the sessions the artist was well-attuned to the young people's needs and offered them activities with which they wanted to engage. The artist was particularly noteworthy for his ability to contain anxieties of the individual groups about their ability to "do" art despite their limited prior experience and confidence. He was able to work emergently within the constraints of the sessions. This all contributed to building an effective working system between him and the young people. His conduct in the project was a deft balance of communication, artistic talent, enthusiasm and brevity. The arts unit also managed to deal with the large administrative demands of the project efficiently and enabled the ambitious timescales to be met.

There were restraining forces at different levels within the system. The target-led models which focused on quantifiable outputs within specified timescales as a condition of funding left little scope for emergent working and re-negotiation of conditions when unforeseen dimensions of the project came into view. The university partners who were the project leads found it difficult to take time to reflect on the distribution of roles and evaluate how things were working. The lack of contact between the youth group leaders and lack of clarity about which behaviours were most likely to contribute to the goals were further restraining forces.

The lack of a well-developed working relationship between the two youth group leaders may have been unwittingly transmitted as tension exacerbating the divisions and territorialism of the young people. This links to the SCT notion of isomorphy, in that

dynamics at one level in the system are often mirrored at others. Working with vulnerable and often troublesome young people creates a great deal of surface-level conflict and raises anxieties. There is a temptation to locate the source of tension at the point in the system where it is being acted out. Isomorphy suggests that the tensions will be present, though possibly less obvious, at other points – in this case, between the youth workers from different areas and in unclear role distribution between the university partners. The middle system level is particularly significant since it shares a boundary both with lower levels (the young people) and those above (the university partners). On reflection, had more attention been paid to building the system between the youth workers and the artist, by working with their similarities and differences, the exchange visits in particular might have been more successful.

Without a shared view in the project team on how to work with differences, it is unsurprising that the youth workers and, in turn, the young people did not integrate. Defensive territorialism is often observed by researchers in projects containing hard-to-reach participants. In this project it was exacerbated by mixing the two groups of young people without achieving prior contact and a degree of mutual understanding between the youth group leaders. It is a testament to the skills of the artist and the university partners in building a good working system that some of the experience was cooperative.

The work continued after the project formally ended with members of the arts unit attending practitioner-based dissemination events organised by PRU. PRU continues to work with its partners in the semi-rural area and the arts unit was also able to achieve some of its project goals in terms of developing links with the local community. Both university and community partners have expressed interest in working with the artist again. He is currently involved in several projects in the local community, working with young people. In sum, despite the difficulties, relationships were built and the reservoir of goodwill that accompanied the project's inception remains.

The project highlights the problems that can arise when "shotgun" partnerships are formed in order to secure essential funding and when the time pressures and parameters imposed by funders take no account of the needs to build relationships and systems. In such circumstances, projects that require collaboration between several different stakeholders in a variety of locations will struggle to agree on a clear, coherent agenda. Or, as in this case, overt clarity in relation to overall project goals may obscure differences on how to implement them on the ground. Projects may fulfil many of the intended outputs as a result of persistence and goodwill whilst struggling against timescales, funder requirements and targets that are inimical to the conduct of sensitive and innovative work with all its attendant inevitable risks and pitfalls.

The project also highlights the fact that young people may have an ambivalent relationship with their own "place". They recognise shortcomings in their environment and among familiars may achieve a realistic appraisal which could usefully inform regeneration initiatives. However, identities are bound up with localities and when confronted by differences they find challenging, they may revert to defensive territorialism and respond pejoratively to differences. Professionals working with such young people around place might consider what they can do to facilitate a reflective dialogue with other young people facing similar challenges. Key to this is clarifying roles and objectives at all levels in the system. Even more important, professionals must avoid getting drawn into territorial

allegiances themselves. This involves paying attention to the way they are working with their own similarities and differences as a precursor to facilitating this work with the young people.

A number of elements of SCT theory proved useful in reflective sense-making required to write this paper. As the writing process progressed it shifted from description of events and conditions which had seemed beyond the control of the research team to a focused analysis of what might have been done differently. The idea of integrating similarities and differences as key to development and transformation, the notion of isomorphy and the force-field analysis were helpful in addressing the complexities of the exchange. It also became clear that there is much to be learnt from the kind of dialogic and polyvocal writing process in which we engaged in the production of this paper.

Notes

1. SCT uses the method of functional sub-grouping as a way of discriminating and integrating differences. In a work team, members are trained to explore an issue with those who share a similar view, while those who have a different perspective listen. When the first group has done enough exploring, a second subgroup explores its view, and so on. As it works, each subgroup discovers some differences in what initially seemed only similar. What also happens is that the team as a whole will discover similarities in what initially seemed only different perspectives and a new integration will take place.

2. Thanks to Tom Wengraf for this phrase, which he suggested as a way to construe the experience as a learning opportunity.

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