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Making a difference with psychology

Edited by: Karen Niven, Suzan Lewis & Carolyn Kagan
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH PSYCHOLOGY ..................... 1

Contributing authors ........................................... 5

Foreword from the British Psychological Society ........ 20

Foreword from Richard Benjamin’s brother .............. 24

Making a difference with psychology ...................... 26

PART I: MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO COMMUNITIES ........... 34

Chapter 1. I dig, therefore I am: Place identity and participation in community-based archaeological projects .................................................. 35

Chapter 2. Does knowledge of local history increase prosocial behaviour and belongingness? ..................... 42

Chapter 3. Enhancing young people’s engagement: A case study in regenerating local community .............. 49

Chapter 4. Youths’ peacebuilding potential: Intergroup contact and civic participation amongst a post-accord generation in Northern Ireland ....................... 56

Chapter 5. Understanding refugees’ lives .................... 63

Chapter 6. Promoting engagement, health, and well-being in ethnically diverse societies .................... 70

Chapter 7. From fact to fiction: Reducing the adverse impact of homonegativity amongst adolescents through real-life drama .............................................. 77

Chapter 8. Does imagined contact work, even when initial prejudice is strong? .......................................... 83
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9. Why are cities threatening?</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10. Comparing witnesses’ memory performance in remote versus face-to-face investigative interviews</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART II: MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO HEALTHCARE ……..107**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11. Does wearable technology affect adolescents’ motivation to be physically active?</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12. Can mindfulness help at-risk adolescent boys?</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13. Neurodiversity: Developing guides to success using participatory research</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14. The use of visual methods during recovery from substance misuse: A collaboration with Fallen Angels dance theatre</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15. Making a difference with ‘smartphone psychology’: Can mobile digital technologies help create new insights into self-harming behaviours?</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16. Environmental predictors of suicide rate and helpline calls in Scotland</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17. Can primary healthcare interventions be used to mobilise collective action to tackle poverty?</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 18. Life as a migrant nurse in the UK</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART III: MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO WORKPLACES ……..171**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 19. Enhancing meaningfulness in the workplace: Testing the effect of a personal development initiative</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 20. Can a brief mindfulness intervention reduce early signs of compulsive internet use and enhance relationship quality? ........................................ 180

Chapter 21. Can prosocial music reduce customer aggression in call centres? ........................................ 188

Chapter 22. ‘Who am I?’ at work and at home: Authenticity and well-being in different roles .......... 195

Chapter 23. Dealing with work email: What are we doing and why are we doing it? .............................. 202

Chapter 24. Do zero-hours contracts affect the personal and work lives of care workers? .................. 210

Chapter 25. Ethnicity and organisational politics: Making sense of the game and learning its rules .......... 217

Chapter 26. Investigating understandings of age in the workplace ..................................................... 225

Chapter 27. Developing career capabilities for young people in transition to adulthood .................. 234

Chapter 28. What encourages employees to go ‘green’? Towards an understanding of pro-environmental behaviour in the workplace ............................... 241

Notes on sources .............................................................................. 248

Projects funded by the Richard Benjamin Trust ....... 277
CHAPTER 3. ENHANCING YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY IN REGENERATING LOCAL COMMUNITY

Emily J. Oliver & Catrin Roberts

Prosperity and well-being are typically highest when individuals engage and work collectively within their local communities. However, programmes to increase such engagement do not always show success, especially for young people. In the present project, we examined the effectiveness of techniques drawn from psychological research on behavioural change for promoting community engagement among adolescents.

The Problem

Engaged communities contain individuals who have the opportunity, capacity, and willingness to work collectively. Such communities are more prosperous, cohesive, and have healthier and happier residents than those with disengaged residents. Enhancing community engagement is therefore desirable, and it is particularly important to find effective ways to do this for disaffected or disinterested groups within society.

One such group that has been targeted as a cause for concern is young people (e.g., adolescents), especially those in deprived or isolated communities. Young people can be engaged in education or work, yet still be politically, democratically, or communally disengaged. But young
people *can* and *do* make a vital contribution to the sustainability of their community, and we need to do more to promote and enhance youth engagement.

Thus far, community development projects and funding have primarily targeted the opportunity and capacity of citizens to work collectively (e.g., through facilitation of citizen groups, or investment in facilities and training). In the present study, we took a different approach by testing a way of enhancing the final aspect of engagement - young people’s *willingness* to contribute to their communities.

**Rationale For The Project**

Comprehensive reviews of policy or training-based approaches to youth reengagement suggest mixed evidence in terms of intervention effectiveness, with evaluations showing either small positive, or no, effects.¹ Recommendations for enhancing the success of training-based interventions have included making additional effort to engage participants who felt forced to attend courses, and helping individuals to commit to change. So, drawing from psychological behaviour change models that are more typically applied in counselling and healthcare settings, in the present study we supplemented a training course with an intervention targeting willingness to engage. The selected intervention, motivational interviewing,² is a method of enhancing readiness and willingness to change. It has been demonstrated to effectively change knowledge, intentions, and behaviour across a range of settings,³ including healthcare, education, communities, and via telephone delivery.
The key premises of the current study were that: (i) to enhance community engagement, individuals’ willingness to engage is critical; and (ii) to develop and sustain willingness to engage, individuals must endorse the value of contributing to their community. Our aim was to apply motivational interviewing as a context-appropriate method, in order to foster endorsement of values and therefore to build community engagement among disengaged adolescents.

What Was Done

The location of the study was a small Welsh town (residency of approximately 5,000) with historical dependency on the mining industry. The demographics of the area were typical of those in receipt of European Union-funded regeneration projects: there was high unemployment, and the level of residents with no qualifications was higher than the United Kingdom average. Furthermore, previous studies had identified low community engagement, with 64% of residents reporting feeling a lack of influence on local decisions and 35% unwilling to get involved in local issues.4

The sample consisted of 52 students in Year 9 (average age 14 years) who were enrolled onto a school-based European-funded training course (‘Llwyddo’n Lleol’). The course focused on enterprise-related skills, was in its second year of delivery at that location, and was provided by an external company.

Before starting the course, participants completed questionnaires measuring their motivation for community
engagement, and the extent to which they valued goals relating to community participation and helping others. We then split the participants randomly between three groups. The first group received a motivational interviewing intervention, the second a goal setting intervention, and the third received no additional intervention. These groups were selected for two reasons: (i) to attempt to isolate the effects of motivational interviewing versus more general support (i.e., goal setting); and (ii) to provide a realistic comparison based on typical experiences of participants in similar training courses.

In the week following initial course delivery, participants in both of the intervention groups received a one-hour session, delivered in a small group setting. All participants then received the final day of the course, after which the questionnaires were re-administered so that we could assess changes over time.

**What Was Found**

Statistical tests were run to see if there were differences between the three groups (those that received motivational interviewing, those that received goal setting, and those that just received the course). After taking out any pre-course differences in young people’s scores, the analyses showed that there were differences at the end of the study.

The groups differed in terms of their motivation for engaging in positive behaviours in their community and towards others. Motivation for community involvement was the least valued and endorsed in the group who only did the course.
When we examined the values and aspirations of the groups, those who had received goal setting reported having more goals relating to extrinsic (i.e., externally rewarding) factors like financial success and fame, and fewer goals about intrinsic (i.e., internally rewarding) things like helping others and improving society, compared to the motivational interviewing group. Compared to the other groups then, the motivational interviewing group endorsed engaging in a positive way with their community and had stronger aspirations to contribute in this way.

**Making A Difference**

The findings of this study suggest that using brief motivational interventions can influence young people’s motivation and goals regarding engagement within their community. A key success of this study was providing support for the potential effectiveness of motivational interviewing in regeneration and training contexts, and specifically for its use with adolescents. Our study also provided support for the efficacy of motivational interviewing when delivered in a group setting, which is an important practical advance, as administering the intervention this way may be more cost-effective than one-to-one approaches. Given that the pursuit and attainment of extrinsic goals can have negative implications for well-being (and pursuit of intrinsic goals can have positive effects), the findings also suggest we should use goal setting interventions cautiously.

Practically, the study shows that interventions targeting motivation can be embedded within and around existing
training provision. By working with staff at both the school and in the course delivery team, the project’s findings can be used to inform future training schemes. Additionally, our recruitment and training of a Welsh-language research assistant during this project built capacity for future research in the region. Sharing the findings with academics and professionals working within the regeneration sector is helping to stimulate discussions about how we can best work with young people and isolated communities.

In future studies it will be important to examine whether similar interventions influence young people’s actual behaviour. Although attitudes were altered in the present study, we do not yet know whether this would translate into greater community engagement over the longer term. Identifying this would strengthen the case for funding motivational interventions.

Recommendations

- Both motivational interviewing and goal setting can enhance the quality of young people’s motivation for community engagement
- Goal setting should be using cautiously; it can promote a focus on achieving extrinsic ‘successes’ (e.g., financial rewards) that might undermine well-being
- Delivering brief motivational interviewing in a group setting can change attitudes in the short term. Longer-term follow up is needed to see whether these changes persist and go on to influence subsequent behavior
- When commissioning or funding training projects, regeneration professionals should consider opportunities
for practical application of behaviour change techniques. This has potential to enhance long-term sustainability of investment in regeneration

**Further Reading**

More information about the regeneration work conducted at Blaenau Ffestiniog, can be found via the following link: [http://www.blaenauffestiniog.org/town-centre.html](http://www.blaenauffestiniog.org/town-centre.html)

For more information regarding the ‘Llwyddo’n Leol’ project, see the following link: [http://www.menterabusnes.co.uk/en/llwyddo](http://www.menterabusnes.co.uk/en/llwyddo)