

# Rocking the boat while staying in it: connecting ends and means in radical community work

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**Abstract** At a time when the term 'radical' is predominantly associated with intolerance and violence, this article explicitly interrogates its meaning and application in community development praxis. Based on a qualitative inquiry, influenced by community development principles, community workers with rich experience at both micro- and macro-levels in Ireland were interviewed individually, then collectively to elicit their perspectives on the possibilities and challenges for radical community work in Ireland. While specifically located, its conclusions have relevance for community work and community development globally.

Findings show that being a professional and a radical are not incompatible. Some radical community workers recognize their dual role in service of the state and their obligation to work with others to change it. Acknowledging that marginalized communities do not have the access to power available to more privileged communities necessitates strategies to maximize influence. At the same time, there is an intimate connection between the methods used to transform society and the nature of the subsequent society. As workers accountable to communities, funders and the profession itself, the strategies engaged with and tactics adopted warrant careful consideration.

This article seeks to challenge the dichotomy of either conflict or consensus approaches as overly simplistic. It suggests that some community workers can hold a radical agenda and conflictual ideology while pro-actively engaging with decision-makers who, although part of systems, which perpetuate inequality, can also be agents of change.

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## Introduction

The concept of radical inherits its most powerful meaning from the Latin *radix* or 'root' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). The daily use of the term has undergone a distinct change in the recent years. Once used primarily to refer to alternative left-leaning thinkers, its current usage in mainstream media<sup>1</sup> points to extremists influenced by left or right ideologies who use violence to achieve their goals. Radicalization is identified as a global problem, leading to acts of terrorism influenced by political or religious fundamentalism (McDonald, 2018). However, radicalization can also describe processes whereby people become increasingly conscious and involved in transforming the society for greater social and environmental justice through non-violent and political means. Community development is one such process.

Writing many years ago about community development in the United Kingdom, Blagg and Derricourt (1982) (p. 11) claim that 'a crude anti-state view' has blocked the development of community work practice and argue that 'the development of a satisfactory theoretical base for radical practice, and a clarification of goals are long overdue'. Suggesting that this argument is still applicable, Shaw (2011) proposes a new formula of in, against and for the state, reasoning that because the state has become 'so deeply colonized by the market, it becomes fundamental for community development to work also for the state to create an "inclusive political culture"' (p. 139). For community workers to reclaim some sense of agency, she maintains, they need to hold on to the characteristics of community work, which 'mark it out as a progressive practice' and hold a 'strategic position at the intersection between policy and politics' (pp. 143, 144). Ledwith (2011) points to an increase in state funding as contributing to a division between radical and pluralist community development agendas suggesting that 'working in and against the state, revolution or reform, has presented an on-going tension for community work, with the state as both employer and oppressor' (p. 17).

With a commitment to examining this tension and contributing to addressing the divide between theory and practice, which 'renders community development vulnerable to more diluted interpretations' (Ledwith, 2011, p. 95), this article introduces qualitative research carried out with community workers in Ireland. Focusing on the workers themselves and their practice, it demonstrates how radical agendas and strategies inform

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<sup>1</sup> Guardian 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2018/jun/canadas-niceness-is-the-very-reason-its-young-men-radicalize> World Politics Review 2018 <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/26082/europe-s-prisons-already-hotbeds-of-radicalization-are-filling-up-with-isis-recruits> Irish Times 2017 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-should-not-be-complacent-about-radicalisation-1.3112909>

and shape their work. While specifically located, its conclusions have relevance for community work praxis globally.

The article begins by introducing community work in Ireland to illustrate the context for this inquiry. Literature on radical, conflict and consensus ideology and its application in practice is presented, followed by the research methodology. Drawing from both the research findings and relevant literature, the final section presents conclusions of the inquiry about the ends and means of radical community development work, as well as findings about the workers themselves.

### **The Irish context for community development work**

In Ireland, community work and community development (the terms now tend to be used interchangeably) has been funded directly by the state as a mechanism to address poverty and inequality since the late 1980s. Practice in Ireland has a 'distinct discipline and ethos... committed to working professionally and collectively with communities for social change, inclusion and equality' (Adhoc Group, 2008, p. 12). One distinction is that unlike many other countries, its origins are not strongly associated with social work (Carroll and Lee, 2005) and the collective emphasis has remained central. Another feature – in recent decades – is the transition from primarily conservative to more radical community work approaches (Forde, 1996; Lee, 2003; Motherway, 2006). From the 1980s onwards, this involved a focus on poverty and inequality alongside efforts to address both the causes and consequences of societal problems, with the state viewed as a target as well as a partner for change.

The period from 1990 can be characterized by increased opportunities for structured engagement with the state. At a national level, a model of social partnership, which evolved from 1987 and sought to address both economic and social agendas, has been identified as a powerful force in shaping Irish social policy (Moran, 2009). This model offered opportunities for some community and voluntary organizations to act as 'social partners' to influence future policy directions. However, there has also been widespread criticism of the benefits or otherwise of this model for the social partners and their representative groups. Social partnership was mirrored to an extent at the local level but with a primary focus on local interventions rather than on policy-making power.

For almost two decades, from 1990, there existed an unprecedented time for community work in Ireland. The emergence of a specific community development programme and other programmes with community development as a significant element points to its recognition by decision-makers for addressing community and societal issues. Concepts such as

participatory democracy, active citizenship and social inclusion are visible in government policy documents and commitments of that time. However, this recognition has altered dramatically in the last decade. Firstly, opportunities to engage in the business of democracy have contracted, causing very significant changes in the infrastructure for, and the practice of, community development work. McInerney points to a questionable capacity and little incentive to 'develop relational and transformative capacities' to understand democratic participation and address social justice (McInerney, 2013, p. 15). These factors alongside developments at the time leave the author to conclude that Ireland has moved towards 'a reduction in, rather than deepening of, public participation in policy making' (McInerney, 2013, p. 17).

Secondly, some writers point to the marginalization of dissent whereby 'people have started silencing their own voices of dissent and many community organizations have grown cautious', adding, 'Funding relationships have to be sustained and the state is the core funder for much of the sector. So, protest remains unvoiced in the public arena, dissent is diminished and advocacy is limited within careful boundaries. An agenda for survival has taken over' (Crowley, 2012, p. 2).

Thirdly, structural support and resourcing of community work has contracted. Forde *et al.* (2016) suggest that changes in government policy indicate an expectation that community and voluntary groups should not act independently of government, should not respond to needs identified and prioritized by communities and should focus their work solely on the delivery of services on behalf of the government. Harvey's (2012) research states that between 2008 and 2012, 'an arbitrary and often incoherent pattern of cuts' was disproportionately targeted at the community and voluntary sector because of its 'uneasy' relationship with the Irish state. Recalling also the elimination of a substantial number of state agencies concerned with social policy during this time, he bemoans the removal of 'champions of social policy from the decision-making cycle in public administration' (Harvey, 2012, p. 19). With reference to community development, he contends that a cohesion process 'curbed the independence of community development projects' and led to the Community Development Support Programme being replaced with various programmes, which although named as community development focused heavily on individual progression and job activation (O'Keefe, 2010).

These factors raise considerable challenges for community workers in Ireland who seek to create the conditions for deeper democracy. However, in some ways, these trials are not new. Thirty years ago, Clarke (1990) maintained that Irish community workers are inevitably drawn into cooperating with or working for the, sometimes hostile, state. 'It is up to them to work

out how to exploit the situation to their advantage. They need to set their own agenda, rather than continue reacting to someone else's' (p. 13). More recently, others argue that civil society organizations in Ireland need to pay more attention to finding ways to build relationships for mutual benefit. Referring to broader civil society; [Daly \(2007\)](#) suggests the challenge 'is to shift the terms of debate from the one which underlines the juxtaposition of state and civil society to the one which explores how a more mutually reinforcing relationship can be developed' (p. 170). [Lee \(2006\)](#) also maintains that because the term 'poverty lobby' has been frequently used in a disparaging way by senior politicians in referring to the broader community and voluntary sectors the sector 'might usefully give more attention to building effective relationships with the political system' (p. 22).

[Powell and Geoghegan \(2004\)](#) (p. 272) point out that the goal of community work in Ireland has been to 'democratize democracy' in a genuinely inclusive form, acknowledging both the enormous ambition of the task and the 'ample evidence of citizens willing to try'. Developments in recent years as outlined here suggest that the size of this task has grown and the capacity of community workers to realize the task has reduced. In saying this, it is important to note the emergence of some potentially positive policy and institutional arrangements. At a policy level, the publication of the five-year strategy, *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities to 'support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019–2024'* visibly emphasizes the language of partnership and collaboration. Somewhat unusually for a government document, it notes that the Strategy was 'co-produced' by government and people 'from the community development, local development, community and voluntary, and local government sectors', who will also be involved in monitoring its implementation ([Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019](#), p. 6). While a single strategy document cannot obscure the impact of the command and control approaches deployed by the state in recent years, its recognition of the role of 'strong, autonomous community development' may signal some shift in ideation (p. 20).

At an institutional level, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty – a provision under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014 – legally obliges all public bodies in Ireland to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of everyone affected by their policies and plans. The duty challenges public bodies to assess the human rights and equality issues they believe to be relevant to their functions and purpose and to set out actions to address those issues. While models of best practice under the public sector duty are not yet easily identified, the duty does provide a rights-based instrument for local- and national-level activists to pressurize public bodies to do their business differently. It is also worth noting that the duty is referenced no less than thirteen times in the

Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities strategy document, providing a direct link to the strategy and a mechanism to monitor the duty's delivery.

Over the decades, and despite the challenges in the broader community sector, there remains a robust understanding and practice of community work in Ireland. A robust cohort of community workers continue to create spaces to collectively analyse and act for collective outcomes – as observed by [Ledwith \(2016\)](#) (p. 157) on meeting some of them at Maynooth University, Ireland as 'a hotbed of fire-in-the-belly radicalism'. The purpose of this research was to examine the nature of this radicalism. The following section presents literature on radical, conflict and consensus ideology, strategy and tactics.

### **Conflict and consensus ideology and practice**

In the community development, literature connection is made between conflict and consensus ideologies and their application in practice. How one understands the world shapes how one interacts within it. Although community workers engage in an intervention with communities and groups to shape their collective circumstances, the nature of this intervention has clear conceptual and ideological underpinnings. Differing ideological perspectives reflect consensus or conflict macro-theories of society, according to [Popple \(2015\)](#). Informed by a consensus view of society, pluralist community work is concerned with 'social consensus and marginal improvements... enhancing "political responsibility," placing particular importance on the learning of skills and "technical competence"' (p. 60). Conflict ideologies inform socialist community work, which adheres to the belief that 'it is possible to achieve change through rational discourse, the fostering of collective values and moral persuasion' (p. 71). Drawing on Rothman's (1979) models of community organization practice, [Banks \(2011\)](#) also differentiates between the 'wide range of functions, methods and (implicitly) ideologies embedded within the generic term community work' (pp. 167, 168). Acknowledging that the boundaries between them are fluid, she identifies the following categories:

- *Community service and planning*, underpinned by 'liberal reformist, or even conservative, consensus seeking' ideologies;
- *Community development*, underpinned by 'participatory democracy, liberal democratic, communitarian, or even conservative consensus seeking' ideologies and
- *Community action/organizing*, underpinned by 'Marxist, anti-oppressive, or other structural theories of social problems, conflict theory' ideologies (p. 167).

Both Pople (2015) and Banks (2011) connect ideological underpinnings with actions used to achieve change. However, the distinction between ends and means, goals and strategies are not always clear-cut, according to Smith (1990), who argues that ‘the decision between two different strategies is often a political not a technical decision’ (p. 219). Boehm and Cnaan (2012), referring to various global studies of community practice, differentiate between collaborative and confrontational strategies. A collaborative strategy, they suggest, indicates a concern to connect both ends and means while a confrontational strategy is associated with a ‘high degree of concern for only one major interest, the goals of the action system’ (p. 159).

Ife (2002) observes a ‘tacit assumption of a conflict model’ within the ‘quasi-military language of much community work – campaign, strategy and tactics (p. 138)’. While he argues that conflict is a part both of society and processes of change, therefore inevitable within community development, conflict approaches create losers (rather than winners), resulting in marginalization and alienation (p. 138). He asserts that a consensus-seeking approach, achieved through non-violence and inclusion, is more consistent with the values of community development.

Known for his confrontational methods, Saul Alinsky wrote *Rules for Radicals* (1972) as a guide for community organizers and other radicals who want to change their world by differentiating between ‘being a realistic radical and being a rhetorical one’ (p. 17). According to the author, working to change oppressive structures and systems requires recognizing the world as it is, working within the system in order to change it, arguing that ‘revolution must be preceded by reformation’ (p. 21). He argues that radicals must adapt to differing political circumstances and ‘avoid being trapped by their own tactics and forced to travel a road not of their choosing’ (p. 6). Alinsky’s work has been criticized for placing a greater emphasis on tactics rather than an overall strategy for ‘social transformation’ (Mayo, 2004, p. 414).

Our overall attitude to conflict infuses our strategies and tactics, according to Westoby and Dowling (2009), who propose a model of ‘dialogical’ or ‘careful’ conflicting appropriate for community development. They argue that the primary commitment of community workers is to nurture relationships while engaging with conflict and suggest that this approach to conflict ‘recognizes that people are sometimes embedded within institutional processes, habitual patterns, and ideological positions that undermine their capacity to see afresh, and lock them into polarized positions’ (p. 105).

Drawing from literature on radicals within social movements and community organizing presents similar themes. Becker and Horowitz (1972) (p. 52) write that while most radicals agree on the ‘reduction and eventual removal of inequalities in society’ as a key feature of any radical, political

objective, most disagreements lie with the means by which goals can be achieved. Similarly, Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) (p. 6) argue that while transformation of the system is the goal that can happen through gradual institutional reforms, which are 'based on and aimed at a transformation of the fundamental qualities and tenets of the system itself', key debates in social movements, they write, 'tend to fixate on tactics' (p. 240).

Reisch (2005) points out that radical community organizers use both conflict and consensus tactics but often differ on which are most effective. He suggests that radical community organizers seek 'the re-distribution of power and resources, the dismantling of oppressive systems, and the creation of viable alternative institutional arrangements (filtering) their radical agenda through a reformist lens' (p. 295). Their strategy seeks to re-define the relationship between the individual, the community, the society and the state, 'with the state identified as an appropriate arena for political struggle' (p. 294). 'Radical pragmatists' support a combination of tactics, including those deemed more 'acceptable by the political culture' while others believe that being inside the political system 'inevitably leads to co-optation'. While illegal tactics on an occasional basis are widely supported, such as non-violent civil disobedience, most reject violence because it 'effectively undermines the values and goals radicals profess' (pp. 295, 296).

A widespread theme in literature on radical ideology and practice has been the question of changing the state either from inside or out. Reflecting the themes of this research, Mouffe (2009, 2018) echoes the message of the seminal publication *In and Against the State*, written by the London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1979). She argues that radical politics should not mean withdrawal from existing institutions but instead engagement for challenge and change. Radicalizing democracy requires 'not the seizure of state power, but, as Gramsci put it, one of becoming state' (2018, p. 47).

The literature presented here explores ideology, strategy and tactics. In much of the community development literature, practitioners are categorized according to conflict or consensus ideology and associated actions. A distinction is made by some writers between radical agendas and reformist strategies. However, this research suggests these distinctions may be less fixed. The next section introduces research findings, which suggest that the participants interviewed for this research have a conflictual view of the world but seek to build consensus in their practice.



## Research methodology

This qualitative study involved interviews with professional community workers in Ireland to elicit their perspectives on the possibilities and challenges for radical community work. 'Professional' is taken to indicate those in paid employment who identify as community workers, perform community work as their main occupation, and embrace its professional values. Using a purposeful approach, interviewees were selected based on specific elements to provide deep insights and rich information that would 'manifest the phenomenon intensely' (Marshall and Rossmann, 2011, p. 111). Such elements included: a gender mix; having worked in paid employment as a community worker in Ireland for more than ten years; having been in positions of leadership in the field through involvement in the shaping of community work (discipline, programmes, practice); having knowledge and experience of engaging with the state at micro- and macro-levels; and an expressed commitment to challenging structural causes of poverty and inequality as evidenced through written or verbal contributions in collective spaces. Conscious that sample sizes in qualitative research should not be so large that it is difficult to extract thick, rich data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 242); twelve individuals were invited to participate. Participants quoted in this article are briefly introduced here by pseudonyms that they personally chose:

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Angela	has more than 20 years' generic community work experience locally and nationally. This work has been instrumental in creating changes at policy and legislative levels.
Fiona	has more than 10 years' community work experience with both geographic and identity communities at local and national levels. This work has been particularly successful in both securing policy change while ensuring the community is to the forefront of sought change.
Jack	is a community worker for more than 30 years' community work and was instrumental in initiating longstanding community development projects focusing on poverty, drugs and urban regeneration in an urban working-class area.
John	started out his working life as a community worker more than 30 years ago, and then moved into national and international management and research roles overseeing community development programmes.
Karl	has more than 20 years' experience at local, regional and national levels, working primarily with urban working-class communities. Much of this work has involved supporting communities and groups to build alliances and represent issues on local, regional and national structures.
Kevin	has worked as a community worker for more than 15 years' in a generic project based in an urban working-class community. Much of this work has focused on supporting the community as a driving force behind the physical and social transformation of the area.

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Lily	has led on work to support and promote community development work in Ireland at local, regional, national and international levels. In previous work in a national equality organization, she introduced a community development approach to its lobbying and advocacy work.
Lola	has worked as a community worker for more than 20 years with various identity communities at local (urban and rural) and national levels, where she has been involved in many decision-making structures on various issues.
Paddy	is a community worker with more than 15 years' direct community work experience working at local, regional, national and international levels. This work has been ground-breaking in creating changes at policy and legislative levels towards equality for Irish Travellers.

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In-depth conversational style interviews took place seeking to 'understand the world from the subjects' point of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world (Kvale, 1996, p. 481). Having transcribed the interviews, an inductive, data driven thematic analysis methodology was used. Then, reflecting community work processes of moving from the individual to the collective, a group interview was conducted with the same participants. This provided increased opportunity to gather rich data reaching beyond the answers of single interviewees (Flick, 2014), and led to a second stage of analysis. Findings and analysis are presented next, with direct quotes from participants illustrated in italics.

### **Beyond a consensus or conflict dichotomy: research findings**

If you've only got two options – pick a third.

(Alinsky, 1972 referenced in Westoby and Dowling, 2009, p. 113)

*The All Ireland Standards for Community Work* introduce the task of community work as achieving progressive social change, defined as 'the changes in policy and law, structures and institutions, individual attitudes and behaviour and societal ideologies that are required for a just and equal society to prevail' (AIEB, 2016, p. 29). This ambition is reflected in the commitments of research participants towards meaningful change – recognizing that change happens at different levels, and throughout the process. Such change is meaningful because it targets causes – beyond symptoms – of issues faced by communities and groups. According to Paddy, this '*obviously involves looking for root and branch reform of services, policy, programmes and the equal distribution of resources*' or, as described by another, '*collective change and structural change*' (Lola). Working only for individual or local-level change, one worker (John) acknowledged, would have left him feeling '*frustrated*'. '*Otherwise, we are just tinkering at the edges*', according to Angela. Another revealed her own commitment to structural change when she realized that

her contribution would not involve *'a minding people thing ... (as) I knew nothing was going to change as a result of that work'* (Fiona).

When asked to elaborate on their understanding of radical community work, research participants pointed out that any intervention seeking to address root causes of structural inequalities inevitably requires a focus on the state. As Karl states, *'if you have the ideas, if you can mobilize people, give them the understanding that it's not their own personal failure; that it's structurally embedded. That's very powerful but you can do nothing with it until you bring it into the political arena'*. Another argued *'You have to be in the room to create the conditions for change'* (Kevin). In community work, which seeks to pay attention to both ends and means, participants suggest that the specific nature of the engagement with decision-makers warrants attention.

Participants see radical community work as strategic, pragmatic and innovative practice, which is, according to Catherine, *'thoughtful, looks around corners, clever in how it operates, manages to reach goals, but without shooting itself in the foot'*. The strategic dimension is visible in how participants spoke about their interventions. For example, Kevin talks about *'manoeuvring the suits'* and Lola of *'playing the power game well'*. Fiona describes herself and her colleagues as *'political pragmatists'* who move strategically towards defined goals when they feel the conditions are right.

Being pragmatic means recognizing and starting from the real while working towards the ideal. Karl suggests that radicals have *'to engage in the real world as well'*. Fiona, in the same vein, believes that community work requires an analysis to recognize what *'might never get across the line'* and involves a combination of *'pragmatism meets capacity, meets change, meets what's winnable'*. It also means being clear on the possibilities and boundaries of what community work can achieve, as John argues *'you have to be realistic about what is possible to change'*. Community workers are pragmatic about how they are radical in keeping a perspective on what they are doing and what is possible to do. According to John, *'There are always cracks and gaps. You need to find the cracks and gaps in the system that you can use'*. There is, however, no mapped-out route or manual to follow. As Lola states, *'There isn't a formula for change, you know. And power always kicks back. ... When it gets into that really messy phase, you're walking in the dark ... trying to create the path, you're laying it as you're walking it'*. Managing this uncertainty means being innovative and creative while recognizing and working from the real to the ideal. She suggests that *'nothing is ever ideal ... and if you assume a set of conditions need to be there in order for change to happen, you'd be chasing those conditions forever'* and end up *'shoring up the status quo'*. Instead, good community work requires *'managing with what you've got, with a big vision. You've got to be very creative in that. ... That's where the magic is'*.

In discussing the connection between ends and means, a number of participants ruled out the use of 'any means necessary' to achieve the purpose, pointing out that consideration of appropriate tactics need to reflect community work values. Lily maintains that radical community work is about challenging but without engaging in '*extreme lengths*' to do so. Paddy was also eager to separate out radical community work from militant action, which he associates '*with aggression and violence . . . which can be dangerous, counterproductive, can lead to destruction and feed into extremism*'. While he points out that he is '*annoyed and angry*' and recognizes his right to be, he feels an obligation to manage that constructively. He explains that while he will protest and demonstrate, he won't '*occupy a building, handcuff myself to railings, go on hunger strike, it's not my type of politics*'. In identifying which tactics are appropriate for a specific task, he warns that rights claiming can become rights denial. '*I, as a human being and as a community development worker, do not believe for one second that it is right or proper in your quest for justice and equality (that) you have the right to infringe on the rights of others*'.

Kevin considers other individuals he knows who have a very strong ideological stance but questions how easily that translates into work with communities. He believes that as someone with responsibility for projects and services, he needs to consider his actions carefully '*How do you match the framework with the practice? That's the challenge . . . Sure, it's easy to shout – it's easy to rally up a load of anger*'. Along the same vein, Jack suggests that outrage, while justified, achieves little.

*Of course you can empower people by giving them stones and letting them go up to the Dáil and break all the windows; it's a certain form of empowerment. (In) a situation where the state has the complete hegemony over the intellect of the vast majority of the people, throwing the bricks at the Dáil ends up in nothing except going to jail.*

Community workers interviewed do not present as fearful of conflict but do not seek to create conflict in their dealings with others. They seek to '*separate the individual from the issues*' (Kevin), and value '*where they (decision-makers) are coming from*' (Paddy). All the research participants spoke about the power dynamic between decision-makers and community representatives but suggested avoiding getting stuck in an '*us and them*' dynamic. They recommended instead a '*measured*' approach, which seeks to build constructive respectful engagement, avoiding being overtly confrontational.

#### *Radical as rooted or grounded*

Reflecting the original meaning of radical as root, interviewees understood radical community work as necessitating being held firm by values informed through analysis, critical friends and spaces, and an autonomous community sector infrastructure.

Being grounded in oneself suggests the ability of workers to be anchored and hold strong *'when in those really challenging spaces'* (Lola). Becoming part of a system or culture, which creates and sustains oppression is one such challenge, warns one community worker, stressing the importance of maintaining integrity between one's mission and application of it. *'If you are going to sup with the devil, you need a long spoon'* (Jack). The long spoon, he points out, means remaining true to one's values, vision and the community itself.

Radical community workers also need to be grounded in a strong social and political analysis. All interviewees pointed to the centrality of this analysis to their work. Without it, all community workers have is *'sound bites'*, according to Kevin, who believes,

*The most important thing that third-level institutions can give people, rather than the tools and all ... is social analysis. If you don't understand how the world in general works, then you're only dealing with the narrow perceptions that are deliberate in the society in which you live. And you'll implode politically, emotionally, spiritually.*

Karl places importance on the role of professional education and training processes:

*The analysis that people get from college makes the difference. It's not just about learning skills, not just about a big lump of knowledge. It's the ability to think, the ability to join things up, and the ability to relate your values to what you are doing. It's the bit that people struggle with when it's new to them.*

A strong analysis is crucial to inform practice, but it must lead to action. As one community worker suggested, *'In community work, you don't have the luxury of having a shit-hot analysis and doing nothing with it'* (Fiona).

Critical friends help workers stay grounded in community work values by staying *'pepped, a bit like going to college again'* (Kevin). These individuals help to *'keep you sharp, keep focused and keep motivated'*, according to Lola, who stresses the importance of being open to being *'confronted'* and having people who act as sounding boards, offer good solid advice, keep you from a protected zone and *'don't just tell you what you want to hear'*. She believes that being a member of professional associations and participating in seminars and conferences provides opportunities to *'unpack and unpick experiences ... (offering) more sustenance than anything I've ever read'*. Finally, she suggests that the process of being accountable and connecting with others as critical friends *'holds you in those really challenging spaces'*.

Being genuine to the interests of the community requires mechanisms where communities direct the work – for example- through a voluntary management board, in order to *'safeguard you don't get above your station or*

*that you're not tying them into things that are not in their better long-term interest'* (Jack). Echoing this point, another interviewee maintains that *'when it comes to really going up against power, our collective power comes from being grounded and connected with people in the struggle. And that their voices are reflected in it'* (Lola). Being grounded requires hard work to know the community and the issues they face. As one community worker explains, *'I know the gangsters, I know the drug scene and I know the crime scene. I know it. I understand it'* (Kevin).

In order to create change at a macro-level, an infrastructure and strong linkages are needed, interviewees observe, between local, national and global arenas. This requires both vertical and horizontal links between people directly affected and others seeking change. John suggests that doing community work, which aims to address root causes requires community workers to understand the policy context. For example, *'If you're working with lone parents and you can't relate to the policies around lone parents, it seems to me, you are only doing half the job'*. On the other hand, those working at the national level need to stay connected to the issues by having *'direct contact with people in order to understand the dynamics involved in what you're trying to change ... and to stay grounded'* (Angela). This requires maintaining a balance between *'the big picture, the little picture'* (Kevin) or the *'bird's eye view and worm's eye view'* (Lily). In addition, cross-sectoral interests across geographic areas should develop joint analyses and act collectively in their collective interests. This could begin with coalescing initially on what they can agree on and *'when the relationship develops, you can bring other issues in'* (Biddy).

## Discussion

Banks (2010) (p. 2170) defines integrity as meaning 'having no part taken away ... being in a state of completeness or wholeness' created, maintained or preserved through unifying various parts. The author contends that strength of purpose and ability to implement values is a crucial element of integrity in practice, which also needs to be located within a 'set of political commitments' (p. 2182). This description rings true of the political commitments and values applied in the practice of community workers in this inquiry. Integrity is demonstrated through considered strategic engagement and use of tactics, illuminating what it means to be a radical community worker.

### *Strategic engagement*

Community work as a political practice requires a strategic engagement with decision-makers, according to research interviewees. A similar argument has been made elsewhere. Daly (2007) and Lee (2006) suggest that civil

society organizations need to pay more attention to building relationships with decision-makers for mutual benefit; Chambers (2005) (p. 85) contends we need to be 'serious about powerful people as people'.

Community workers interviewed expressed a conflictual perspective on the world. They see the state as flawed and needing structural transformation based on changing the ideological underpinnings in order to address the causes and consequences of poverty, inequality and social exclusion. At the same time, they – all situated in or around the system like Alinsky's (1972) radicals – choose to work within the system in order to change it. Akin to Reisch's (2005) (p. 295) community organizers, they 'filter their radical agenda through a reformist lens' using a collaborative strategy connecting purpose with outcomes. This reflects Mouffe's (2000) (p. 15) concept of agonistic politics, which aims at the 'creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity'. In her view, political engagement is at its most democratic when it facilitates diverse and opposing political positions to be heard in public spaces.

Ife (2002) believes that a consensus-seeking approach is more consistent with the values of community development, with conflict approaches resulting in marginalization and alienation. In contrast, the approach of community workers in this research is informed by conflict theory, but they engage in collective spaces, which may seek consensus but do not assume it. They recognize the conflict that may exist but are not characterized by it. In this sense, the approach of these community workers reflects Westoby and Dowling's (2009) model of dialogical community development involving careful conflicting. Community workers in this research do not see any contradiction in holding a conflict ideology but engaging in collaborative spaces. They consider themselves as pragmatic, political professionals who work within the political system as it is, in order to change it for the better. They recognize the challenges of negotiation, understanding also that while some issues are non-negotiable, attempts at compromise are necessary. This echoes Alinsky's (1972) interpretation of compromise, not meaning a betrayal of ideals, but as a 'beautiful word ... always present in the pragmatics of operation' (p. 59). For this inquiry, compromise is not seen as an end in itself, but as a stepping-stone towards communities realizing their goals.

In conclusion, participants called for a strategy of in and against, with and for the state. If, as participants suggest, radical community work aims to recreate the state in the interests of all who live here, then the formula of 'in and against the state' is incomplete. If democracy is a claimed characteristic of the state and values of participation, accountability and justice are deemed fundamental, then community workers act also for the state. Being 'in and against', and 'with and for the state' suggests a community work practice

whereby community workers can simultaneously be funded, challenge and engage with the state for mutual benefit. Agonistic politics embraces diverse and opposing views and locates them within official democratic spaces. The Irish state funds oppositional political parties and other lobby groups, such as farmers' organizations, and the right to dissent is accepted for these groups. In the interests of the widening and deepening of democracy, the interests of excluded and marginalized groups specifically warrant attention.

#### *Use of tactics*

'... if you beat your head against the wall it is your head which breaks and not the wall' (Gramsci, 1957, p. 56).

While the overall strategy in radical community work is to mobilize communities to make the 'personal political', and by implication collective, the community workers interviewed felt that tactics need thoughtful consideration. It can be easy to focus on and/or critique the tactic, but the real question is how any tactic supports the overall strategy to realize the intended purpose, in the short, medium or longer terms. A crucial factor for community workers in this consideration is their triangular accountability towards (a) the community, (b) the profession and (c) employers.

Actions taken must be considered to ensure positive consequences for the community and avoid irreparable damage caused by ill-thought-out, even if well intentioned, tactics. This does not exclude direct action or unusual tactics, inspired by Alinsky or others, or the withdrawal from spaces or agreements that do not serve the interests of the community. The role of the community worker is to work with communities to analyse and act collectively, considering all the means available and contemplating possible consequences. This requires acknowledging that the oppression and stigmatization of some excluded groups might mean the types of effective tactics possible are limited.

#### *Radical community workers*

While more than half the community workers interviewed for this inquiry clearly identified as radical, others were reluctant to do so. The research suggests several reasons for this reticence.

First, the word 'radical' itself is associated with extreme or militant views and actions. The community workers interviewed in this research sought to avoid using such methods to realize their objectives, arguing that their processes and values demand that people – whoever they are – are treated with respect and courtesy. A reluctance to engage in conflict was not an evident characteristic of the interviewees of this research – they did not seek



to ignore or negate the conflict that exists – but considered approaches to dealing with it.

Second, some interviewees indicated an uncertainty as to what a radical community worker is. While the community workers interviewed in this inquiry describe radical community development with ease, some felt more comfortable naming it as an aspiration rather than a current identity for themselves. The reluctance to name oneself as a radical worker is understandable. The reality of day-to-day work for any community worker involves elements that could be described as creating the conditions for, rather than actually doing, community development. It would not, therefore, be accurate to describe all the work one does as radical, even if one identifies as a radical community worker. If ends and means are intertwined, it can legitimately be said that doing radical community development involves creating the conditions for it to happen.

Third, in some contexts, it is arguably difficult to do radical community work. Marx (1852) argued that we make our own history but not in circumstances of our own making. In Ireland and elsewhere, individual engagement is understood and prioritized over collective engagement, analysis and action; non-state actors are funded primarily for service provision reducing possibilities for community work; spaces for public participation in decision-making have been narrowed and in some countries may never have existed; and dissent is marginalized. Root causes are difficult to reach from a local base, so community work, even if practised locally, needs structural and infrastructural mechanisms to connect local with global issues. If these conditions do not exist, radical community work may remain an aspiration rather than reality.

## Conclusion

At a time in Ireland when the spaces for doing radical community work and advancing the democratizing of the state are diminishing, this article provides insight into community workers with a radical imagination, a political agenda and a praxis framework, explaining also why some may shy away from naming themselves as radicals.

Community work as an intervention is concerned both with change itself and the means by which change is achieved. Connecting means and ends necessitates engagement, which is collaborative, constructive and challenging, avoiding the use of every, and any means to achieve ends. As professionals, and therefore accountable to communities, employers, and the profession itself, strategies require consideration of long- and short-term effectiveness, consequences and impact on others. As radical pragmatists,

some community workers adopt a collaborative approach and engage in reflexive dialogue with communities and others. Because of the marginalization and 'othering' of communities, radical community workers are cautious to further stigmatize and stereotype communities by actions, which will not have popular support. Their strategy is one that seeks to dismantle and re-create structures, systems and ideologies, which support oppression, but the use of tactics, including greater engagement with state agencies and decision-makers, depends on the opportunities and possibilities available given the political context of the time.

Radical community workers can be described as grounded individuals, anchored by a clear analysis and value base and a strong connection to the communities with which they work. They are rooted by critical friends and created spaces to reflect on values, actions and consequences. Roots spread wide, connecting local concerns with global issues and vice versa. Radical community workers survive because of all these factors, but their ability to adapt to varying contexts does not disintegrate their integral being. Deep roots offer stability for uncertain times and an ability to move position while staying centred – essentially being able to navigate rocky waters yet stay afloat and unfazed.

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