Empowering A Community: Standing up to "The Powers That Be"

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Concepts of "community" range from "… a social group" (Rappaport, 1977) to "…a geographical area, locality or neighbourhood." (Orford, 1992). Abraham Wandersman (1984, cited in Heller, Price, Reinharz, Riger and Wandersman) suggested that there were two ways in which we discuss a community: one is "a place" and the other is "a set of relationships and resources". He goes on to discuss three levels of community in which people live, and refers to them as "three units of community: the block, the neighbourhood, and the larger community." These three units are broadly defined as (1) the two sides of the road facing each other, with streets at either end creating a boundary; (2) the larger area that can be defined by the "elementary school district"; and (3) the larger area that combines several neighbourhoods, or an entire town.

Wandersman's outline of the three units of community provides an excellent starting point for describing and discussing my community. *The larger community* in which I live is Warrensville. At the 1996 Census it had a population of 66,279 consisting of 45,336 European, 15,030 Maori and 5,913 other ethnic groups. Age groups are fairly evenly spread.

Since 1935 Warrensville has been the home to a firm that began canning local produce for export. The firm was taken over by a major international company (which I shall refer to as "the Company") in 1992 (Wright, 2001).

The Company has always been housed in a block of Warrensville close to the railway line, and in the centre of residential properties of two main suburbs. Its major factory is on George Street and spreads along North Street to Flack Street.

Over the years opposition to the Company being allowed to set up and expand its operations in a largely residential area has been periodic, but successive councils had not been particularly sympathetic to the residents' views. However, the council did manage to confine the main entrance of the Company to George Street, essentially an industrial area. The Company has made repeated requests to move the entrance to the rear of its operation in Flack Street.[1]

The *neighbourhood* affected by the Company's plant comprises an area of approximately three square kilometres. The block runs from Paki Road to the west (the main road to Newsea), through Flack Street to Stream Road to the east (another route to Newsea and Hayesnorth), along Alwyn Street back to Paki Road. Of these four streets, Flack Street is the most densely residential. Within the block there are numerous streets, nearly all of them residential.

The *block* in which I live, and the subject of my investigation, is a one-kilometre block of Flack Street that runs from Stream Road to Newman Street. (Flack Street in its entirety is two kilometres long with three intersecting streets: Carol Road, Newman Street and Toka Road.) There are 52 properties in this single one-kilometre block. For ease of reading I will refer to this community as *the block.*

At the end of 2000 the residents of the block noticed some changes taking place to the Company's plant at the Flack Street end. An old house was removed from the corner of Flack and Newman Streets, a roundabout on the road was constructed and construction work was carried out to that boundary of the company's property. It was soon evident that the main entrance had been moved from the smaller, less residential area of George Street, to the busy, but residential, Flack Street. A notice had, apparently, been placed in the local paper, and letters advised a few residents in the immediate vicinity, but the residents of *the block* only found out when the sign 'Main Entrance' was placed on the gate.

The 2001 tomato season was most disturbing for some residents of Flack Street, with double trucks taking produce to the Company 24 hours a day. On making a private representation to the Council, followed by a meeting with the Deputy

Mayor, the Roading Manager and the Environmental Manager, it became clear that the Council had not expected the changes to impact on *the block* of Flack Street between Carol and Stream Roads. They had only expected it to affect the residents of the block from Newman Street to Carol Road – the immediate vicinity.

The Council convened a public meeting in January 2002, which included a representative of the company, to provide an opportunity for the residents of 'the neighbourhood' to voice their concerns. The meeting was not well attended in comparison to other public meetings of similar importance, but those who did attend were residents of some smaller streets within the *neighbourhood*. As in the case of *the block*, Council had not anticipated that these areas would be affected by the changes.

I believe that the Company, and the Council especially, have sorely underestimated the impact that the change of the main entrance would have on residents in *the block*, and they are still not acknowledging that there is a problem: it would appear that notices of meetings are only being sent to those in *the block* who have lodged formal complaints. In addition, the minutes of the last meeting did not reflect any of the concerns raised by the residents of the *block*. An e-mail was sent immediately to the author of the minutes asking that those concerns be added to Council's record of the minutes, and included in the list of concerns forwarded to the Company, which they agreed to do.

As in the Love Canal case in New York State, the authorities were only prepared to consider action for residents in the immediate vicinity of the problem site, whilst in reality; it is 'paying lip service' to the wider issues (Levine and Perkins, 1997).

I decided to carry out a survey of the *block* to gauge the strength of feeling about changes to our environment, and to find out something of the demographics of the *block*, in an effort to understand why the Council had not taken this community into consideration when it consented to the changes at the Company's plant. I also hoped that the findings might help to persuade Council to take more positive action to alleviate the difficulties experienced by the residents[2] (Jason, 1991).

A survey was delivered to 50 properties from the Stream Road end of Flack Street to the Newman Street roundabout. The questionnaire asked if residents were aware of the changes to the Company's main entrance, and if so, had the changes affected them; had they reported any concerns to the Company or Council, and if so, what response had they received. The survey also asked if the residents were aware of the public meeting held in January, if so, did they attend, if not, why not; if they attended the meeting did they feel that their concerns had been taken seriously.

Seventeen questionnaires were returned - a 34% response. Considering that approximately 24% of the properties in the block are on back sections, and probably not as affected as the rest of *the block* by some of the issues, such as increased noise from trucks, the response rate was encouraging.

Some 94% of the residents who responded knew that there had been changes at the Company, but 19% of them said that they had not been advised formally. The effects of the change were that 76% of residents experienced an increase in traffic volume, 59% heard increased noise from trucks, 41% noted other site noises, 24% had interrupted sleep and 65% noted congestion on the road from Newman/Flack Streets roundabout. Some 24% of respondents were unhappy about the unsightliness of the Company's Flack Street frontage (an high open wire fence with hundreds of wooden pallets stacked against it with rubbish strewn around the base of the fence).

Only 15% of the residents had advised the Council or the Company about their concerns, and did not consider that their complaints were taken seriously: one respondent commented that "they are really only concerned with residents in the first block" (from Carol Road to Newman Street).

Only 40% of the respondents were aware of the meeting and none of them attended for various reasons ranging from ill health to being out of town. One of the comments relating to the meeting was that "ordinary people have no say".

When asked to make suggestions to resolve the issues raised, 24% suggested moving the main entrance back to George Street, and 41% made no suggestions at all. When asked what the residents thought of a community liaison group

who could meet regularly with Council and the Company's representatives to improve communication and co-operation, 47% thought it was a good idea, 29% did not respond and the remainder made comments that suggested that it would be pointless because the Company and Council are not concerned about what residents think. One respondent said that the Company "have a law unto themselves".

From the statistical information requested, the survey revealed that the block in question is not the lower socio-economic area that it is generally believed to be, but consists largely of professional and semi-professional residents, with 41% in the 40-49 age group. Some 83% of the respondents were female. Again, this suggests that council has underestimated the nature of the area and the effect that changes at the Company has on the residents, and the value of their properties.

Personally, I was dismayed at the number of responses that suggested that it was a waste of time trying to change anything, because the Company and Council had ridden roughshod over the community for years and nothing would change that. It appeared that the older residents had become resigned to what they called 'progress', and the younger residents felt powerless to fight it.

Because Council has only received a few complaints from residents of *the block*, Councillors hold the view that there is no problem. The only problem, as Council see it, is with the individuals: they are just moaners or neurotic people who cannot or will not accept change. By 'blaming the victim', Council is able to justify its power and authority to make decisions without consultation, and without any consideration for the effects that those decisions may have on residents (Ryan, 1971 cited in Levine and Perkins).

Council's relationship with the Company is more important than its relationship with the residents because of the financial influence the Company has on the area with respect to employment and rateable income.[3] In terms of William Ryan's theory (cited in Levine and Perkins, 1997) Council and the Company have control because power and wealth are in their hands. It will stay that way as long as they consider the complainants to be the problem.

They will both resist any attempts to change their position because it would not be in their interest econo-mically or socially to do so.

From the ecological perspective, however, the problem is not an individual one. According to Kelly's (cited in Levine and Perkins, 1997) principle of interdependence, each part of the social unit is interdependent, and any change to the 'eco-system' (the community and its inanimate environment) will affect all other parts. The changes made to the Company's plant has indeed affected the residents, and the residents will need to adapt to the changes to prevent potential psychological or physical problems developing as a result.

These matters raise questions about what effects changes at the Company's plant will have on residents of all levels of the community over a prolonged period of time. It was clear from the January 2002 meeting that those who attended were very angry, and did not consider that their concerns were being taken seriously. Many were suffering from a lack of sleep, or simple 'quiet enjoyment' of their homes because of the increased heavy traffic, and other noises emanating from the site. Such continuing anxiety, lack of sleep and anger has the potential for serious psychological and physical health problems.

It appears to me that the there are two interlacing needs in our community; first, there is a need to develop a sense of community, and second, there is a need to provide the community with a sense of empowerment.

The community at present is a number of people who happen to live in the same street. Many of the residents are at work all day, with evenings and weekends taken up with the household/gardening chores and family events. People living in the same street do not socialise as they might have done in the past. However, a sense of community is not necessarily about socialising with one's neighbours – it's more about having things in common, and feeling the same way about situations that affect the neighbourhood, or in this case *the block*. By knowing that others in the community share the same concerns, residents feel less isolated, and better placed to adapt to the situation (Sarason, 1974 cited in Levine and Perkins, 1997).

Rappaport (1977) said that empowerment is

the "relationship between people, policy, programmes and professionals". In this case, the residents need to feel that they have a meaningful relationship with Council and company, that they are being listened to, and that some difference can be made to the way both organisations make decisions that affect the community. At least by creating some way in which residents can participate by communicating and working with Council and the Company, the residents will *feel* more empowered (Riger, 1993) and have a "greater sense of control" over their situation (Chavis and Wandersman (1990) cited in Riger, 1993).

The community's strengths lie in the number of well-established, high value properties, owned largely by professional and semi professional people who are committed to the neighbourhood. These residents no doubt have many useful skills that can be developed into useful adaptation strategies.

The *neighbourhood* has already successfully fought a proposal to make the street a main arterial road from Hayesnorth to the motorway off Paki Road. The reasons used to fight that proposal are just as relevant to the present situational circumstances – an established residential area which houses two schools and a kindergarten, raising issues of safety, a change to the character of the area, and potential devaluation of property prices.

It is clear that the residents of this community will not be able to resolve their problems overnight; they will need to be patient and persist with their attempts to be heard, all the time keeping the lines of communication open. In this way they will build their self-confidence, their understanding of the political and organisational structures that they must deal with, and develop the skills necessary to achieve their goals (Thomas and Veno, 1996).

In Julian Rappaport's (1977) discussion of social intervention he refers to Philip Berck's (1976) work, which suggests that intervention should be aimed at the "setting", or organisation that is the source of the problem. Rappaport says that once we accept that our social institutions and organisations are the cause of many of the problems in our day-to-day lives, then we can begin to ask the questions - how do they cause

the problems? and, how can they be changed?

We know how the Council and the Company have caused the problems for the residents of Flack Street; they have imposed upon them a main entrance to a busy factory within a residential street, bringing with that increased heavy traffic which, on occasions, continues 24 hours a day. The most important question now is how to go about changing things.

The ways in which community psychologists can intervene in community problems are many and varied, but the choice of which form of intervention should be used depends upon how the problem is analysed, and what kind of result the individual or community expects to achieve.

Stanley Murrell (1973) suggested six levels of intervention. Level Five is described as "Intersystem Interventions" which refers to the involvement of more than one system, and different achievement tasks, such as "reducing conflicts or soothing transitions" for individuals who are in some kind of relationship or exchange with the systems. Murrell points out that this level of intervention can be complex because the intervener has no authority with the systems involved. In other words, the community in the *block* of Flack Street will have its work cut out as it tries to change attitudes and policymaking of the Council and the Company!

One of the methods of intervention used at Murrell's (1973) Level Five is a Community Action Programme which organises groups from the community to bring about changes to the institutions that are seen to be the source of the community problem.

There are many examples of community action groups in the literature, one of the most documented cases being the Love Canal Homeowners Association in New York State. The group developed from the realisation that the housing estate on which they lived had been built on a chemical waste dump that was leaking toxic fumes and creating a serious health risk to the residents. Residents complained over a period of time, petitions were signed, and community meetings were held, but it was not until the residents formed an action group that was able to plan a strategy that lobbied politicians and government officials, and made intelligent use of the media to gain attention to its cause, that this

community was ultimately able to achieve its goals (Levine and Perkins, 1997; Orford, 1992). A study of the Love Canal case by Stone and Levine (1985, cited in Orford, 1992) speculated that involvement in the action group provided the 'activists' with a sense of control over what might otherwise have been uncontrollable events.

Control, or the perception of having control, is in general considered to be more healthy and desirable than control that is perceived to be imposed from outside (Raeburn, 1996 cited in Thomas and Veno, 1996). With this in mind, Raeburn developed a model based on the general principles of community control and empowerment (amongst others) as an approach to the social change processes. This model, called The PEOPLE System, is built around a framework of needs assessment and the formulation of goals, which are written down, reviewed and evaluated. Its over-riding aim is to develop a sense of commu-nity as described by Sarason (1974) - people in the community sharing the same concerns feel less isolated and better placed to adapt to a situa-tion. (Raeburn, 1996 cited in Thomas and Veno, 1996).

These models provide the basis for the interventions that I would plan to use in my community; the main goal would be to establish a social action (or liaison) group that will provide a means of communication and consultation with the Council and the Company. The initial stages of this process have already begun.

Networking is an important ingredient to the process of social action. A similar residents group in Newsea was formed from issues that arose between the local community and the pulp mill in Newsea. The Chairperson of this group and a representative of pulp mill's management were invited to the May meeting to explain how that group works, and provide some ideas, and offer encouragement for this community to form its own action group.

A further helpful source of information would be a spokesperson for the small group of residents in the Kitty Street area of Warrensville. It has recently emerged that these residents have had issues with the Council and the Company in the past. As a result of their actions or discussions, they have been instrumental in the Company finally being able to achieve its long-awaited desire to close their main entrance George Street and move it to Flack Street.

The community will need to be canvassed thoroughly in order to find residents who would be prepared to work on this action/liaison group, and to discover what particular skills the residents have that may contribute to the success of the group. The group should not be too large, perhaps six to eight representatives, and the members of the group should represent the various *blocks* of the larger community, or *neighbourhood*, affected by the Company's plant. Residents will, no doubt, need some encouragement to be involved, and one way to do this would be to remind them of their success in diverting the main arterial road scheme from Flack Street to another area.

Once the action/liaison group has been formed it will need to formulate clear goals and expectations, and record them for constant review and evaluation. Its main focus must be on maintaining the lines of communication with the Council and the Company by way of regular quarterly meetings. It must establish its credibility with the two organizations by being thoroughly professional in all its dealings with them, presenting factual information where necessary, and encouraging them to share information that is of interest to the residents. Reports of all meetings should be circulated to all residents to keep them informed.

It is vital that the action/liaison group keeps all residents informed of its activities on a regular basis, perhaps by way of a newsletter. It must never forget that it exists to represent the needs of the residents, and its priority must be to maintain the support of the residents to whom it is responsible.

It is important for the action/liaison group to realise that its ultimate goals are long-term, and that it may not be able to change what has already happened. However, its existence will serve two purposes: firstly it will make the Council and the Company aware of the fact that the residents are genuinely concerned for the welfare of their community, and secondly, it will provide the group with a vehicle to maintain pressure on the organi-zations to consider the residents' needs and concerns in any future plans that could affect the residents.

Some of the shorter to mid-term goals that

are more likely to be achievable, and should be focussed on initially, are issues such as:

- beautification of the Flack Street frontage of the plant;
- reinforcing the importance of the street as an established residential area with schools and kindergartens, which raises issues of safety, the character of the street, and property values.
- ensuring that the Company's haulage contractors comply with regulations relating to the condition of their trucks which may affect noise levels;
- limiting additional traffic along the street;
- rethinking programmes and schedules for the tomato season to reduce the 24 hour traffic;
- discouraging further development of the Flack Street factory in favour of the Toka Street factory.[4]

If the action/liaison group can prevent additional negative changes to their environment it should be regarded as a worthwhile course of action. Successes in smaller issues will provide a sense of achievement and empowerment that will go some way to satisfying the needs of the co-mmunity. In addition, they will provide the group with the confidence to tackle the bigger issues with vigour and determination.

An important aspect of all social interventions is evaluation. It is necessary to determine whether or not the interventions have satisfied the needs of the community, or achieved its goals (Gregory, 1999).

In the PEOPLE system a goal review process is carried out annually at a public meeting. Other methods used include participation rates, satisfaction measures and surveys (Raeburn, 1996 cited in Thomas and Veno, 1996). These are appropriate methods for the evaluation of interventions used in my community.

To evaluate the interventions to be used in my community it is necessary, first, to look at the community before the interventions were put in place, and then to take another look at some later stage to see if the community has changed, and if so, in what way (Contact Course, 2002).

Several methods of evaluation are appropriate here. Firstly, a survey has already been carried out with respect to residents' awareness of issues,

and attitudes towards them. Regular follow-up surveys should be undertaken to determine whether or not the residents perceive any improvements to their environment, and changes about the issues initially raised, as a result of the action/liaison group's work, and if so, to what extent. Secondly, annual meetings should be held where residents can discuss the goals that were set for that year, and to decide whether or not they consider that they have been achieved (as in Raeburn's PEOPLE system). Thirdly, research should be undertaken to measure the levels of participation and satisfaction with the intervention to gauge whether the intervention has been successful in providing a sense of community and empowerment.

Several studies have been undertaken with a view to measuring 'sense of community' and 'empowerment', using telephone surveys, and measuring issues such as feelings of neighbourhood membership, perception of control over condition, and social interaction. Similar designs and measures could be used in research carried out in my community (Kingston et al., 1999; Speer, 2000)

Some positive outcomes should be measurable by the end of the first year of establishing an action/liaison group, especially if the goals and expectations have been realistically set. The co-mmunity should, indeed, feel a sense of achievement and control over what happens to them and their environment. However, evaluation also acts as a detector for negative or unintended outcomes that can be assessed and monitored accordingly.

Some improvements to our *block*'s situation have already occurred: the trucks' engines appear to be quieter, and the 2002 tomato season has been and gone with the minimum of disruption to sleep for the residents. It is possible that these changes are purely coincidental, but it is equally as likely that the Company has been made aware of the strength of residents' concerns and are taking steps to minimise the impact of its operations on the community. At the meetings held in May and October 2002, Council and the Company advised the residents that as a result of concerns voiced at the earlier meetings the following steps had been taken:

- Council had monitored noise levels on site, showing levels in excess of regulations.

The Company had consequently taken steps to reduce noise levels;

- Council had placed parking restrictions in residential areas where employees of the Company had been parking their cars for long periods of time causing residents difficulties entering and exiting their properties;
- The Company had provided a shuttle bus for its employees between the Toka and George Street plants, thereby encouraging employees to use the vast parking area at Toka, rather than residential streets.
- The Company is taking steps to move some of its operations to the Toka plant over the next few years.
- Truck drivers had been spoken to about responsible driving behaviour. One driver had already been dismissed after numerous complaints about his driving behaviour.
- Contractors had been warned that their fleet of vehicles must be properly maintained, and their drivers must adhere to the rules, to minimise noise to residents. Failure to do so will mean termination of their contracts.
- The company is working on ways to minimise the impact on residents of site and traffic noise during the upcoming season.
- Beautification of the Flack Street entrance is under consideration;
- A Residents Liaison Group is to be set up to work closely with Council and the Company. Once the Group is established the Company will provide a comprehensive tour of its operations to ensure the Group has first hand knowledge of the issues of concern to the neighbourhood.

Once an active liaison group has been established that is able to communicate with the Council and the Company in a professional and consistent manner, positive outcomes should continue to be achieved for the community. The liaison group will not be able to change the underlying structures of the organizations, but hopefully it will be able to influence the way in which decisions are made, especially those that affect the residents of this community, and be instrumental in providing a happier and healthier environment in which to live.

ABSTRACT As towns and cities grow the boundaries between industrial and residential zones begin to merge. Local authorities providing consents for expansion tend to favour the needs of businesses that will provide income and employment to the community - sometimes at the expense of the private residents. This article is about one such community, where the residents challenged their local authority, and a multi-national company. This was an empowering experience for the residents, who had previously felt helpless to stop the gradual encroachment of this company's operations into its community.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The name of the town, and the streets referred to in this article have been changed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the poeple and places in the community.

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NOTES

1. Most of the historic information relating in the Company's desire to move its main entrance and successive Councils' reluctance to approve such a move, has been gleaned from verbal sources closely connected to both Council and the Company for over 40 years.
2. The residents have already fought off a proposal to make the street a main arterial road from Hayesnorth to the new motorway off Paki Road, and the arguments in that situation are the same in this case, and could be used as additional support for residents concerns.
3. The company in one of the larger employees, both permanent and seasonal, in the area and maintains an excellent record of staff personal development.
4. The Company acquired The Toka plant in 1995. It is an industrial agricultural area on the outskirts of Warrensville.

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