Podcast: Community Resilience and Poverty

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Respondent(s):   Siobhan Parry, Wren Radford

ALEX SWIFT: Croseo, welcome. I'm joined by Siobhan Parry from the mental health and social change charity Platfform, Wren Radford, a lecturer in liberal arts at the University of Manchester. Do you want to start by introducing yourself in more detail and going into more detail about the work you do and your individual projects?

SIOBHAN PARRY: Yes, sure. I'm happy to start. Hi, my name's Siobhan as you mentioned, my role is Head of Service for children, young people, and families at Platform, focusing on things like housing homelessness, alternative to hospital stays, emotional health and wellbeing support, therapy, and wellbeing centre, lots of different things that we do. But I was really keen to chat a little bit further about our project that we're doing at the moment which is part of the Bettws Early Learning Community in Newport because it's a really good example of the work that we're doing at the hyper-local level to look and explore things like being trauma-informed and the impact of like poverty and adversity.

WREN RADFORD: Yes, hi, I'm Wren, I am a researcher and I work in a number of kind of interdisciplinary areas, but the main thing that I do is that I collaborate with communities to explore their experiences of inequality but also their activism or the work that they do to address that inequality. I often use kind of creative arts-based methods and methods that aim to build and support community in the process of research, so seeing participants as researchers themselves for aiming to build relationships, support people's confidence and mental health in the process of- As well, but really any kind of methods that encourage people to reflect and share in the ways that they want to.

ALEX SWIFT: Okay. Thank you both. A central principle behind those projects you set out is this idea of giving people a voice, epistemic justice we might call it, you know, so giving people who have experienced poverty the space and the ability to express themselves, tell their own stories. So, how have you tried to keep to that in your own work and why is creativity, like you described Wren, a valuable tool in helping people to understand and make sense of their experiences with poverty?

SIOBHAN PARRY: Yes, I think that's a really important aspect of the work that we're doing which is part of the Embrace project which is set in the Bettws Early Learning Community, and that project was developed in response to local need by partnership of organisation outcomes in the area. So, it's a bit of a pilot project but that is exactly what we're trying to do is sort of unlock some of that knowledge I suppose that often exists at like a clinic level in the community and for us to be able to have those discussions about the impact of trauma and poverty and for people to really have the opportunity to make meaning and make sense out of their experiences. And I think a really important part of the way that we've developed that project is that it is in coproduction, so there's an outline of where things may go in terms of the topics that we discuss but that's very flexible and fluid, so you might turn up with a piece of information that we're going to explore and then that conversation could go off in a completely different direction, but I think what are the key things in terms of making that a success is that it is very focused on building that safety and trust at the beginning and fostering that sort of environment that allows for that safety for people to feel able to talk openly and I think it's really important that it's done in an environment where it's sort of that peer-to-peer discussions because a lot comes out of that, I think it helps people feel like they're not on their own. And yes, it's just a really important part to that, so I think it's working with people as opposed to parachuted in and, oh, we're going to do this programme or we're going to do this intervention, it's very much about that learning together.

WREN RADFORD: So, the kind of most recent project that I've been involved with which is a good example, it's called The Embodied Everyday and this was in collaboration with people who'd been involved in poverty truth groups in Glasgow and Greater Manchester and the project itself was about exploring people's everyday experiences of inequality but also the very ordinary everyday ways in which people survive and challenge inequality. So, that principle of epistemic justice also kind of comes with that sense of an epistemic priority for people who have those lived experiences where we were discovering that people felt like when they spoke to researchers or politicians or policymakers they felt like they were often asked to categorise their life into kind of different boxes for support, so food poverty's over there, mental health over here, child poverty over there, disability over here and people kind of felt like that wasn't really true to their lived experiences. But they also felt that sometimes the kind of community efforts that they had put in, you know, so activism to maybe get a £5 uplift in a school uniform grant, so we really started with that kind of principle of epistemic justice, of kind of saying that it's important to start from people's everyday lives, showing that you can't really take that experience and separate it all out in kind of neat ways. And the project took place over lockdown, so we had to think in our re-steering group quite carefully about how everything would go ahead, thinking about issues like digital divide and how the project could support people who were quite isolated during that time, rather than overload people with another thing that they had to do. So, as part of that group, we decided on creative journaling. So, we sent people out a journal and an art pack with some prompts and people could write or draw or collage or do whatever they wanted in the space, including voice record, and send that back to us over WhatsApp. And alongside that journaling we also met in small groups over zoom where again people would respond to kind of creative prompts and we would discuss this input and reflect on some of the differences and connections between people's experiences. And this was kind of a hugely generative experience I think, very challenging, I think we all experienced kind of being faced with a blank page and what to put in but the stuff that came back and the things that people shared in

the groups and talked about and the ways that people encouraged each other's creativity was- Was something that really challenged how I think, not just about kind of those abstract principles of epistemic justice but what that looks like in that kind of, exactly as Siobhan said, learning together.

ALEX SWIFT: I'm interested in this idea of how we speak to people and something that's outlined in the- In the Platform manifesto actually that we'll talk a little bit more about later is asking people "What's happened to you?" instead of "What's wrong with you?" So, rather than stigmatising people for their problems they're facing, you know, trying to understand that those challenges are a result of the systems and the constraints that they're operating in. So, do you want to go into a bit more detail about why it's important to make that distinction between those two questions?

SIOBHAN PARRY: It's well documented that our sort of current approach to mental health really needs to evolve because mental health isn't about what's wrong with us, it's about what's happened to us and also what should've happened for us but didn't. So, I think it's about what's happened to us, you know, and being able to communicate that message to people so that they can kind of reflect on that and take a perspective I suppose because often a lot of our services are based or they, you know- Particularly if you think of a medical model places the problem with the individual, doesn't take a step back, a holistic approach really to look at everything that's going on for somebody. So, I think it's a really important message, there's probably lots of different ways that you need to consider how you deliver that message because it's- You know, it's a lot for somebody to take in I think, particularly if you've maybe had a diagnosis for example or have really- All of the narratives around you have led you to believe that you are the problem, but if we understand that distress and mental health are rooted in our circumstances and not in disease and pathology then it's clear why we need to evolve and we need a holistic and social justice approach. We often sometimes as well touch on the word resilience, people say, "Oh, we just need to

make people more resilient," and it's understanding that resilience comes from the circumstances that you're born into and where you live, age and grow.

ALEX SWIFT: Okay, we're talking a lot here about how, you know, mental health challenges Alex intersect a lot with experience of poverty in that the problems perpetuate each other, so mental ill health out of poverty which in turn leads to further mental health issues. My question to both of you is, through your observations how have you seen that specifically happening and what can be done to support people that fall into that cycle?

WREN RADFORD: I think just off the back of what Siobhan was saying there is recognising those issues that are often happening in communities where there's already challenges that people are facing but also hugely there's community members who are supporting one another through these huge mental health challenges and issues. In the work that I've done, the number of times that our conversations revolved around someone supporting not just a family-member or a friend but a neighbour, taking people in when they were really struggling, sitting with people and that ability to listen without judgment being really important in those situations but also, you know, one of the groups that we had people offering each other a lot of help and advice. And sometimes you have to encourage people, sometimes advice isn't always wanted unless someone specifically asks for it but thinking through different circumstances and I think- So, not thinking of the community as- Entirely as a place of harm in which mental health challenges can arise but also a place in which people are supporting looking after one another.

SIOBHAN PARRY: Yes, I think everything that Wren's just said resonates and I think some of the difficulty I suppose is, you know, knowing that our mental- You know, good mental health for example is reliant on those, you know, good things around us, so making sure that we've got access to fair work, good pay, quality housing, good childcare, good education, all of those things and those things definitely affect our mental health, so poverty being one of those things and I

think it- When you think about that cycle, because it is a cycle, it's really difficult because they think there's a bit of a chicken and egg scenario potentially but I think one of the really important things that has come out of our work on the Embrace project is people being able to articulate I suppose that with the stigma that comes sometimes from poverty or, "Poor people make poor choices," for example is often something you might hear people say, that really what we're talking about is that people who are experiencing poverty have a reduced amount of choices. So, I think when we're thinking about how we do, you know, change the system or change society, you know, often we might come in, parachute in with an- Like a solution, oh, we'll- We'll create more employment opportunities for example or more programmes where people- We can get them into work and then they won't be in poverty anymore is just a simple example but we need to understand the impact, psychological and social impact of living in poverty and experiencing adversity in that we may create more opportunities but people may not be well enough to take up those opportunities. So, I think there needs to be a lot more understanding around that and maybe a different kind of support, not just, oh, we'll provide more opportunities, we also need to think about how we're supporting communities and people to be psychosocially healthy in order to take up those opportunities, so it's not just looking at it from one point of view if that makes sense.

ALEX SWIFT: Historically speaking, there's been this idea that of mental health issues as being perceived as meaning there must be something wrong with the person that's experiencing them. I guess my question to sort of both of you would be, you know, why is it important to have a- Like a social side to how we look at mental health and why's it important to look at it in like conjunction with other social issues like poverty?

SIOBHAN PARRY: Picking up really on Wren's point around- Because in our services we're obviously trying to support people in that moment, but what we may not be doing at the same time is thinking about the future and how we, you know, change things for future generations and how we move upstream which is

what the Platform manifesto is all about. If anybody wants to read that it's on our website, but I think it is important for us to understand the social and wider determinants of mental health because as you say they intersect across- You know, all of the other issues intersect across and I think traditionally, you know, the medical model is something that a lot of services are based on, it has a particular pathway with a particular outcome and there's not a lot of room in that I suppose for alternative understandings and narratives that I think is something that's really missing I suppose. And then it leaves people in that situation thinking, you know, even when they've received a diagnosis for example they may be really happy about that and it helps them access support, it helps them understand what may be going on for them but even when you've received a diagnosis it doesn't necessarily help you understand the cause of why something may have happened to you and I think that's where we need to be focusing on, you know, the things that affect us, you know, the social determinants, you know, what childhood circumstances we were born into an all of that sort of stuff. You know, in Wales I think there's a lot of focus on things like adverse childhood experiences, becoming a trauma-informed nation, a lot of really, really positive things in terms of helping us understand and create information that people can kind of access and make decisions for themselves about how they understand their own mental health, but I think what we're- Where we still need to move upstream is that we're still at that very deficit end, so we're focusing on scenarios I suppose that lead us to find ourselves in a situation where we're struggling. So, situations that cause shame, where there's a lack of trust, all of those sorts of things, whereas we need to be shifting and thinking about the more positive end of that, so like what do we actually need in our communities to be able to thrive? What around us helps? What, you know- Situations that help us feel safe and trusted and there's so many things- When you look at it that way, there's so many things that you could look at and make a change at and that then becomes a collective responsibility and that's all- About all of us then, you know, the famous phrase, "It takes a village," to raise a child for example, you know, it's looking at

that as a whole system approach then but not just at a policy and legislation level, that's at, you know, a whole society level I suppose.

ALEX SWIFT: Thank you. And I guess it's important, like with the work you're doing, Wren, to allow people to express themselves, so rather than, you know, having experts dictate how people should view themselves, it's important to give people the tools to either say that they're proud and they're happy with who they are or that, you know, they're facing challenges so you can hear things from the point of view of the people that are directly experiencing what we're discussing.

WREN RADFORD: Yes, absolutely, I mean from the kind of work that I do something that's become more and more important to me in practice has been thinking about the way that research and kind of any collaborative community project can be designed by people to fit with the way they see the world and the way that they work, so thinking about kind of disability justice approaches to research and working together to get people to name what suits them and the way they want to work. So, you know, previous to this project I would have felt that face-to-face was a really important way for us to engage and that, you know, it's kind of we all get together, there's tea, there's biscuits, people chat, you know, it just kind of happens and it's lovely. But actually working over zoom has really challenged me to think about who maybe prefers working over zoom and number of people who, you know, would message before a session and say, "I'm really not feeling great today, so I'm not going to come," and then they'd say, "Oh, I'll just pop online for five minutes to say "Hi," to everyone and then leave," and they'd say, "Well, actually, can I just be camera off for the session?" Of course, exactly Siobhan's point of come as you are. And then people would say, "Well, I'm just lying here on my sofa and in the dark and it's helping me to deal with how I feel today," but then at the end of the session they'll say, "You know, actually that was really good to be with people in how I'm feeling today." And I think the embrace of the different ways that people approach things and not in a kind of- A capitalist capture of neurodiversity and disability in that way of kind of, you know, what's your superpower? Which can be a really empowering approach

for people and that's not to talk down to it, but just recognising that everyone has ups and downs for various different reasons but that the different ways that people see the world can be really important to recognise. And so having a group of people who've shared a number of different diagnoses ranging from ADHD and autism, various mental health diagnoses but, you know, a number of physical diagnoses that they would mention as well, people who use mobility scooters and myself as a disabled researcher suddenly realising, why have I demanded something of myself about being out and about and being seen to be energetic and approachable and visible? Why have I masked certain things about myself in order to be "a good researcher", a good person to be around in community, when actually saying, you know what? These are the things that are struggles for me as well, and not trying to kind of out-narrate other people but recognising that these aren't projects that are helping people into normalcy, but about being where everyone is and saying you can participate from where you are and how do we value that.

ALEX SWIFT: Okay. Thank you. On this idea of community, then, that you mentioned, tied in with that is a piece of work Audit Wales is currently doing on this idea of the social enterprise, so what do you see the role of social enterprises and community projects as being for helping to alleviate problems like poverty and influencing larger social change?

SIOBHAN PARRY: Personally, I really like the approach, I am big into asset-based community development and there's a lot of social enterprises and things like community interest companies-locally to me that are doing some absolutely fantastic jobs and I think one of the things that I think brings about a huge amount of benefit in the way that you can work in that way, not only that you're giving back into your local community, but in the way that you have that freedom and it's kind of a lot more of a grassroots feel I suppose in terms of being able to decide what it is that you're going to do and doing that in coproduction with the people around you in your community and being able to make that very hyper-local to the needs of the community. That is a very different way of doing things for

example from a commissioned service that's been decided somewhere else that then you need to deliver in a very specific way, so I think there's a huge amount of benefit in that and I think it really helps people take ownership as well, a bit like Wren was talking earlier to that ownership over their community and what they want to see. That's my take on it, but I'd love to hear what you think, Wren.

WREN RADFORD: So, I haven't been directly involved in social enterprises, but I know many of the communities that I've been part of and working with have been and have found them really helpful, there's a couple of brilliant projects in Glasgow and Edinburgh in which people are making bread in their local community, you know, even in North Edinburgh, growing the grain that's needed to make the bread as well so all really locally made. Starting services that are needed in the community for that support, so as you say, keeping it really local and kind of addressing those different things. I think one of the challenges that we're talking about in all of these approaches- So, this is not specifically just a critique of social enterprise but also of kind of lived experience approaches more generally, is ensuring that we aren't kind of replicating these undeserving/deserving poor kind of divides and the idea that in order to want to listen to someone, in order to support a particular community, they already have to be doing X, Y and Z. That they have to be part of a social enterprise, they have to be trying to do this, they have to be engaged with mental health services, they have to be kind of very active in their activism and kind of look and speak a certain way. But actually any work that is trying to address poverty and inequality needs to be challenging those barriers and stereotypes as well, you know, that there's a kind of- Austerity discourses around deserving and undeserving, of kind of who's really poor, who's really disabled, who's really a refugee, kind of continuing to this date and so making sure that any of the work that we're doing is saying that that divide is completely irrelevant to that work and people are worth listening to when they're already doing that critical reflecting in their communities about what the issues are and what their experiences are.

ALEX SWIFT: Okay. Thank you for your time today, both. To end this podcast on a very open question, what's one thing you'd like to see change in the way services or people in positions of authority understand and behave towards people living in poverty?

SIOBHAN PARRY: So, that's a really difficult question because I want to answer a million things. For me, I think I would encourage people in positions of power to challenge their assumptions and to put themselves in situations if they don't already have their own lived experience where they can kind of viscerally feel what it's like to be living in poverty and adversity, I think sometimes- Not always because I do think there are people in positions of power who do have lived experience but sometimes, you know, people in positions of power can get comfortable and actually don't want to sit in that discomfort of really facing up to the reality of poverty, you know, nearly one- Four in 10 Welsh households can't afford anything beyond their essential everyday items and Wales does have the largest- The highest, sorry, levels of child poverty in the UK and I think kind of being curious and exposing yourself to situations where you can really sit alongside people and understand the reality of that and what that's like and challenge your own assumptions about it, you know, that like we were talking about earlier, what you often hear people living in poverty doing, you know, they don't make poor choices, they have access to less choices, they're in survival mode and responding to in reality what is, you know, toxic stress. So, I think being able to understand that and I would really love to see more people in positions of power who do have that lived experience that they can bring to that. And yes, just that message of, this needs to be a joined-up approach and, you know, there is definitely appetite for that in Wales and I think we can do it but it's all together and it includes working with people who are having those experiences and for me that is about sharing power.

WREN RADFORD: I think I would echo Siobhan's statement about sharing power and I think that's a really difficult thing to encourage people to do because it requires keeping engaging with people, not just kind of one-offs or, you know,

engaging in a commission for six months, 18 months but recognising the differences across people's experiences in different ways and keeping challenging different forms of inequality and keeping engaging with those very ordinary, everyday experiences and not just listening for the things that you want to hear.