



# Building partnerships with the voluntary and community sectors



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**P**SYCHOLOGISTS should consider their relationship with the voluntary and community sectors (VCS). Here we outline the potential returns for all when collaborating, and the potential consequences of making assumptions about the role of psychology in this process.

Our insights are based partly on two one-day 'Building Partnerships' events supported by the BPS, where BPS Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section and VCS representatives met (Sheppard & Hegarty, 2004). But our recommendations have relevance to psychologists who work with the VCS in other fields. Recent government policy has identified the VCS as a core

component of delivering high-quality public services to those who need them (Home Office, 2004a). The Home Office (2004b) is investing an additional £125 million in the VCS between 2005 and 2006. Three of their policies are particularly relevant to psychology:

- *Health.* The VCS is instrumental in delivering sustainable improvements in health and addressing health inequalities (Department of Health, 2003).
- *Sustainable communities.* The VCS contributes to the building of communities that are safe, healthy, pleasant and viable in civil life (ODPM, 2002).
- *Community safety.* The VCS delivers 'grassroots' projects and initiatives, in recent crime reduction policy, for example (Burnley, 2004; Levi & Maguire, 2004).

VCS agencies offer diverse services, such as victim support, housing and homelessness advice, health care, counselling and legal information. It is recognised generally that the VCS is particularly well positioned to deliver services for populations who are marginalised or who experience discrimination in generic or statutory services. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) voluntary sector is particularly well established (due in part to 'grassroots' responses to the HIV epidemic) and includes HIV prevention workers, telephone helpline operators, community workers, outreach workers and counsellors (Peel & McQuade, 2002; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997). Psychologists are equally diverse, and their roles include research, counselling, psychological testing

and assessment.

The Building Partnerships events were formed out of the BPS initiatives to 'bring psychology to society' and 'give psychology away'. It became apparent that this concept was problematic. VCS delegates joked, 'How long will they be giving it away for?' and 'Can we give it back if we don't want it?', which indicated that the approach, in certain contexts, can be perceived as patronising. A one-directional model in which psychological knowledge is 'transferred' to the VCS restricts the potential for psychologists to learn from their VCS partners.

Giving psychology away to the VCS also has an interesting parallel to a term developed in the public understanding of science literature – the 'deficit model'. In the deficit model, the public are viewed as passive recipients of scientific information, and the purpose of giving science away is to educate and inform the public to address their deficits in knowledge. The deficit model has attracted a number of critics (Durant *et al.*, 1996; Kerr *et al.*, 1998) who disagree with how the public are constructed as 'given to' and 'deficient'. Many groups make up the public, and knowledge is more than a matter of technical detail. The public do not require accurate technical and methodological understanding of science in order to express opinions or feelings about its enterprise (Kerr *et al.*, 1998).

An alternative model for building relationships between science and society is to characterise science as a 'stock of knowledge' which the public and scientists can draw from and contribute to (Kerr *et al.*, 1998). This model might also apply to the relationship between psychology and

## WEBLINKS

- Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sectors: [www.arvac.org.uk](http://www.arvac.org.uk)
- BPS Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section: [www.bps.org.uk/lesgay/lesgay\\_home.cfm](http://www.bps.org.uk/lesgay/lesgay_home.cfm)
- Charities Evaluation Service: [www.ces-vol.org.uk](http://www.ces-vol.org.uk)
- The Compact (agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector in England): [www.thecompact.org.uk](http://www.thecompact.org.uk)
- Grey Literature: [www.grey.net.org](http://www.grey.net.org)
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations: [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk)
- New UK Self Assessment framework for voluntary childrens' agencies: [tinyurl.com/992q9](http://tinyurl.com/992q9)
- Information for voluntary and community organisations: [www.volresources.org.uk](http://www.volresources.org.uk)
- Tools for risk assessment in the voluntary sector: [www.zyen.com/Sectors/not\\_for\\_profit.htm](http://www.zyen.com/Sectors/not_for_profit.htm)
- RefViz (visually displays under- and overresearched areas): [www.refviz.com](http://www.refviz.com)
- Third Sector magazine: [www.thirdsector.co.uk](http://www.thirdsector.co.uk)

the VCS. The role of VCS agencies is more than gatekeeping access to research participants. In this reciprocal model of giving psychology away, both the VCS and psychologists can draw from, and contribute to, a store of psychological knowledge. Psychologists can learn from the VCS, who provide access to hard-to-reach groups, experience in providing services to the public, local knowledge and other areas of expertise. A dialogue between psychology and the VCS can also clarify what each considers valid or useful knowledge.

Ultimately, the VCS uptake of psychology will depend on its perceived relevance (Kerr *et al.*, 1998). We noted that the VCS tends to be selective about which research to refer to. Research with 'useful' findings is used, but studies that do not support the VCS agency's agenda are ignored – a phenomenon we term the 'pick-and-mix problem'. Lack of uptake of psychology by the VCS might be an active process or choice. Agencies may have a disinclination to become involved with particular sorts of psychological knowledge (Durant *et al.*, 1996). It may prove informative to investigate negative responses to, not just uptake of, psychology. Understanding how the VCS can 'facilitate and utilise' (Kerr *et al.*, 1998) psychology and its applied benefits will benefit both sectors.

A practical concern raised during the meetings was the intelligibility of psychology, or understanding of the research and evaluation processes used by psychologists. A source of tension mentioned several times by some VCS delegates was that psychology research was incomprehensible (e.g. a paper was difficult to read) or inaccessible (e.g. the journal was expensive or unavailable). Commentators from other disciplines have proposed a process of 'extended peer review' where research is peer-reviewed twice: once for professional journals, and a simplified version for the public. We noted the popularity of the BPS Research Digest (see [www.researchdigest.org.uk](http://www.researchdigest.org.uk)), where 'snippets' of research are explained in lay terms, and welcome attempts to develop this resource further. Psychologists can use their work to enhance their profile among community agencies, who might find the work useful, but only if they present it in an accessible format and ideally with concrete recommendations. When working with the VCS, it is equally important that

psychologists ask the VCS which 'answers' are sought.

We were reminded at the meetings that many VCS organisations have conducted their own research in their field of interest, driven partly by increasing pressure of VCS staff to justify their work with an evidence base, particularly when funding is restricted. Small-scale evaluations, often without statistical or analytical training, are requested with comparatively short

### 'A dialogue between psychology and the VCS can clarify what each considers valid or useful knowledge'

timescales. Taking the LGBT voluntary sector as an example, research has been conducted by the VCS because psychology was seen to be silent or neglecting topics of concern: homophobia, bullying and violence, mental health, lesbian and gay parenting and sexual risk-taking.

However, much of this research has

never been published in academic journals and is therefore referred to as 'grey literature' (Cordes, 2004). Grey literature is information produced in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing (i.e. where publishing is not the primary activity). In some disciplines, a substantial proportion of references in journal articles are to grey articles (e.g. Cordes, 2004).

Grey is perhaps an unfortunate word, because VCS research is often high quality and can be used by psychologists. In the Danish context, this activity has been formalised because VCS agencies participate in public sector management and a body called the Charities Evaluation Service exists to support charities in designing research. The shift towards a more flexible public sector in the UK means that psychologists here may soon be required to work with the 'models and principles' of other sectors (Jorgensen, 2002).

At our Building Partnerships meetings, VCS delegates provided some initial guidelines for a model of good practice,

## GUIDELINES OFFERED BY VCS DELEGATES TO PSYCHOLOGISTS

### DON'Ts

- Don't view the community/voluntary sector as a convenient way of getting access to respondents/participants.
- Don't send bundles of questionnaires and expect busy staff to distribute them for you.
- Don't send out questionnaires without first checking the appropriateness and clarity of your questions (e.g. do not use the word 'homosexual' and expect gay men to respond with valid answers).
- Don't expect community/voluntary organisations to provide immediate and unlimited access to service users. You will need to earn trust, and may have to work with organisations to establish appropriate procedures for contact with service users.
- Don't be surprised if we ask you to sit on a committee or work for us after the research has finished, we need all the help we can get.
- Don't dismiss small-scale research projects which have been conducted by the voluntary sector because they are not as well designed as academic research.

### DOs

- View community/voluntary groups as colleagues, rather than as a resource.
- Enter into discussion with community/voluntary groups about what research might be useful or helpful in their field.
- Enter into a dialogue with VCS before designing the questionnaire. They will be able to provide psychologists with advice on terminology, the relevance of specific questions, and areas which may be of particular interest to research with their community or service users. Turning up with pre-designed questionnaires won't allow you to get feedback on the relevance and appropriateness of your research questions.
- Use the knowledge and experience of community/voluntary groups about appropriate ways of contacting potential respondents and participants.
- Let community/voluntary groups know the results of your research. Be prepared to present and discuss your findings. Hit-and-run research does not go down well!



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summarised in the box below. One complaint was that certain groups of service users are being overresearched – for example, gay men recruited into HIV prevention studies. Staff also reported a feeling of obligation to participate in psychology research, and complaints of ‘hit-and-run’ research or students ‘requesting 200 service users to complete a questionnaire and then disappearing’.

One practical suggestion, which the Lesbian & Gay Section has acted upon, is the design and publishing of a psychology–VCS database that would collate research from both sectors, highlight the existence of gaps or overresearched areas, and where individuals’ expertise can be found. This resource will be online and searchable. Projects such as these are examples of the term ‘capacity building’, by which

professions can engage with the VCS and help them respond to the needs of the communities they serve (Harrow, 2001). However, developing this resource is not motivated entirely by altruism – psychologists at both Building Partnerships meetings were clear to acknowledge that the database will benefit their work by helping them find research participants.

Bringing psychology to the VCS, and to society, may help increase ‘psychological literacy’ – if this is accompanied by the VCS bringing their understanding of psychology to psychologists (cf. MacIntyre, 1995). This initiative might usefully be described as *sharing* psychology with the VCS, and with society.

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### DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Is giving psychology away necessarily adopting a deficit model of public understanding?

Does uptake of psychology ultimately depend on its perceived relevance?

Do the guidelines apply to other types of voluntary organisation and other types of psychology?

Should psychologists consult and cite more grey literature?

*Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk) or contribute to our forum via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).*

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