Cruel Optimism: disability austerity & Big Society

Katherine Runswick-Cole  k.runswick-cole@mmu.ac.uk  & Dan Goodley  d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk
Big Society? Disabled People with learning disabilities and civil society

• [1] To identify, in the current climate, what opportunities exist for people with learning disabilities to contribute to and benefit from the Big Society and, hence, civil society;
• [2] To explore how disabled people with learning disabilities are participating in British civil society in the 21st Century;
• [3] To examine the ongoing and anticipated impacts of cuts in public funding and new policies of the coalition government on civil society organisations aligned to people with learning disabilities;
• [4] To consider to what extent three layers of Big Society (empowering communities, opening up public services, promoting social action) are illuminated by the practices of three civil society partners (circles of support, real employment, selfadvocacy)?
• [5] To find out how people with learning disabilities are experiencing opportunities for (self)advocacy, employment and community support and participation in civil society?
• [6] To explore the extent to which these examples of civil society impact on the cultural capital and social and emotional well-being of people with learning disabilities.
Methods

• **Phase 1: Key stakeholder interviews:** interviews with disabled people with learning disabilities, members of the third sector, policy makers, lawyers

• **Phase 2: Longitudinal documentary analysis:** an extended analysis of academic and policy literature relating to Big Society.

• **Phase 3: Ethnographic case studies with co-researchers:** an extended period of ethnographic work with the three partner organizations: circles of support; self-advocacy; ‘real’ employment.

• **Phase 4: Analysis:** a period of analysis following the data collection in phases 1, 2 and 3.

• **Phase 5: Impact workshops:** a series of impact workshops to share our findings and develop analysis and impact.

• **Phase 6: Researcher in residence:** a researcher from the project will work with partner organizations to promote knowledge exchange.

• **Phase 7: Public Engagement Events:** a series of events to share research findings and increase the impact of the project.
Overview

• consider the ways in which Big Society creates ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2013);

• cruel optimism: “the relation of cruel optimism is a double-bind in which your attachment to an object sustains you in life at the same time as that object is actually a threat to your flourishing” (Berlant & Seitz, 2013);

• “politics of deferral for disability” (Fritsch, 2013: 146);

• refusing neoliberalism: ‘the disability commons’.
(Neoliberal) Big Society

• “You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment, you can call it freedom, you can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society” (Prime Minister David Cameron: 19th July 2010 cited in McCabe, 2011:2).
Austerity

- austerity is characterized as a necessary period of ‘efficiency’ and ‘thrift’ in order for the state to recover from ‘financial crisis’ (Jensen, 2013).
- the removal of state support will 'toughen up' those who have become dependent upon it (Jensen, 2013).
- the austerity narrative is built on the language of emotion: ‘through envy, distrust, disgust and shame.’ (Jensen, 2013: 2)
Cruel Optimism

• “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being …”.

• the object of desire “contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place.” (Berlant, 2006: 21).
A cluster of promises

- citizenship;
- empowerment;
- community;
- social action;
- route out of (or protection from) poverty for disabled people with learning disabilities.
The promise: active citizenship

• those with 'severe cognitive impairments' have often been consigned to the category of 'human nonpersons'. (Kittay, 2011);

• the problem of social justice is seen as one for “those who are fully and active and morally conscientious participants in society, and directly or indirectly associate together through a complete life” (Rawls, 1980: 546) the lives of disabled people with learning disabilities are pushed to the margins (Bérubé, 2010).
The promise: active citizenship

• Valuing People (DoH, 2001)

• Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People (DoH, 2005)

• Valuing People Now (DoH, 2009)

• Death By Indifference (Mencap, 2007)

• Winterbourne View (DoH, 2012)

• The Connor Report (Hussain and Hyde-Bales 2014)
The promise: a vibrant civil society

- In Big Society, civil society stands for the third sector: voluntary organizations, mutuals, co-operatives (Powell, 2009);

- Civil society is expected to take a greater role in service delivery in a context of funding cuts (McCabe, 2011);

- Third sector: 'fit for purpose'; in competition; compromising local agendas
The promise: social action, community participation, volunteering

- There’s a summer festival every year here in [local town] and they [local volunteers] decorate canal boats and everything. How do disabled people get involved in that, in just the general community stuff? And that’s where they are the recipients if they’re anything, you know, people will collect money and give it to the local this, that or the other. (Louise, IV 5).
The promise: work as a route out of isolation and poverty

• Work as *the* marker for an individual’s social class and social status; indeed, it is used, by some, as a framework by which to measure the social value of a person (Humber, 2013);

• Currently, only 10% of disabled people with learning disabilities are in paid work; this figure has changed little over the last twenty years (Humber, 2013).
Deferral and disappointment

- cruel optimism can operate as a ‘politics of deferral for disability’ for disabled people as they remain attached to promises that seem to be persistently illusory and that this could mean that resources are diverted from creating the ‘crip utopia’ Fritsch imagines (Fritsch, 2013: 146).
The 'disability commons'

- Disablism is defined by Thomas (2007: 73), as 'a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being'.
Working the spaces of neoliberalism

• Three Vignettes
Vignette 1: Henry's Circle of Support

Henry is an 18 year-old-young man with the label of learning disabilities. He is going through what is known as 'transition' in English education policy as he moves from children’s to adult services in education, health and social care. This is often a very fraught time for young people with learning disabilities and their families have to navigate complex service systems and negotiate new support packages (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011). Henry's family were struggling to find out what would be available for Henry when full time education finishes at the end of the year after his 18 birthday. Henry's mum found out about circles of support and, working with a voluntary organisation who trains circles facilitators, Henry has been able to bring together a circle. Henry's facilitator is paid; the facilitator's flip charts are branded with the logo for the organisation she works for that supports and trains facilitators. The company is a thriving enterprise building its networks of circles in the north of England and beyond. Henry commissions the services.
Vignette 2: Chris's job

Chris is in his thirties, he is married and lives with his wife. He works five days a week in the offices of a meals delivery and welfare service. He is out most nights involved in his local community; his favourite activities are the local theatre group and the local country dancing nights. Chris is a paid employee who contributes to his local community.
Vignette 3: Jodie, the ‘expert by experience’

Jodie is an ‘expert by experience’ working for the Care Quality Commission. Several times a year she inspects services provided for people with learning disabilities. She has been involved in the assessment of the quality of the provision for a year. Jodie is an inspector
Finally

- What do you make of cruel optimism?
- Are we optimistically attached to objects of desire that threaten our well-being in neoliberal times?
- Are there possibilities for the 'commons' to resist the processes of neoliberalisation?
References

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