Editorial

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In an applied field of study and action such as community development the process of theorization and the role of critical writing and publishing are crucial. Journals such as the Community Development Journal (CDJ), along with the countless but invaluable magazines, newsletters, reports and working papers, simultaneously provide opportunities for critical reflection and theory building on practice and the evaluation of theorize in practice. Those who write within and about community development are almost inevitably engaged emotionally, intellectually or economically with the subject as academics, researchers, policy makers and analysts, practitioners, managers and even occasionally beneficiaries. Thus, community development can be a practice that to some extent reflects who we are and what we value. At its best critical writing challenges personal assumptions and behaviours and provides insights that extend our conceptual understanding of the field in which we are engaged. However, there can sometimes be a tendency to write rather uncritically as an advocate not only for a specific approach to practice or from a particular theoretical perspective within community development, but for the adoption and advancement of community development as an end in itself. To write too critically can almost feel like a betrayal despite knowing that as a form of social intervention and especially one that has been embedded as a state practice it is prone to many purposes not all of which are progressive in intent or outcome. Any journal that becomes identified as a largely uncritical proponent of the subject not only undermines its credibility but also does a disservice to those engaged in policy-making or practice.

The history, scope, coverage, diversity of readership and range of authors all make the CDJ a unique journal in its field. It has undoubtedly played a role in the theoretical analysis and development of practice, the emergence of better policy interventions and more appropriate support and management for practitioners. Nothing should, however, be taken for granted and this issue begins with an article by Keith Popple, a former editor, who provides a critical account of the role and contribution of the journal over a forty-year period. Popple highlights the various contributions of a
number of key people and locates the various phases of the CDJ in the shifting global political, social and economic contexts, from its roots in the post-colonial period of the late 1950s to community action, social movements and counter cultures of the late 1960s and early 1970s to survive within the neo-liberal context of Thatcherism and beyond. Popple captures well both the struggles to keep the journal afloat and the efforts of the board to extend its remit beyond that of a journal committed to unearthing different and often competing interpretations of practice from the south and north to a wide readership to something of a larger project concerned with supporting organizations and activities engaged in the dissemination of critical analysis.

Mae Shaw’s article connects well with Popple’s short history of the journal. She carries on the tradition of a critical engagement with policy and practice in her re-examination of historical and theoretical resources to better understand the current ‘ideological recycling of community’. This is not the first time ‘community’ has been subjected to critical analysis but it is nevertheless timely and Shaw’s writing is as sharp as ever and her range of sources extensive. Shaw in promoting what she describes as an ‘engaged democratic . . . practice’ argues that while its versatility, adaptability and elasticity are undoubtedly a continuing weakness they also contribute to the creation of public spaces in which contentious politics can emerge or be sustained. Writing from within an Australian context Anitra Nelson, Andrea Babon, Mike Berry and Nina Keath adopt the same critical eye in their examination of power relationships between community members and local planning authorities. Using the Melbourne 2003 initiative, they explore ways in which practices commonly found within the new governance framework continue to act as ways in which those in positions of authority manage the requirement for public engagement and conversely the level of resources required by community members, if they are to challenge dominant or prevailing perspectives. Nelson et al. again highlight the sense of disappointment and disillusionment felt by community members when their often considerable efforts to engage seriously appear to be ignored or diminished by public servants or politicians. The findings may be very familiar but the widespread focus on governance, active citizenship and participation underlines the continuing importance the contemporary research-based analysis.

Mike Titterton and Helen Smart focus in their article on the potential of participatory research methods, an increasingly popular albeit challenging approach, as a collaborative vehicle to be used in benefiting disadvantaged communities. The authors acknowledge the conceptual difficulties and debates surrounding participatory research, not least of which is reaching a definitional agreement, and are clear that their starting point is that it is
a ‘process and outcomes of the active participation of community members and which involves the mutual exchange of skills and knowledge between researchers and the community’. Using a Scottish case study, they seek to demonstrate that participatory research can not only close the gap between the researcher and researched but also provide a means by which disadvantaged groups can convey the impact of social exclusion to policy makers and professional service providers. Following Cornwall et al., Titterton and Smart argue that a key strength in the approach is the value placed upon local knowledge. The case study is also used to explore some of the problems and dilemmas in adopting participatory research especially in the use of local residents as researchers. At the outset the authors note that claims to be participatory are not always well-founded and even here one is left wondering why the research participants do not appear to have been involved in writing the article or whether they would agree with the authors’ conclusions.

Glenn Bowen is also concerned with citizen participation in relation to anti-poverty programmes, in this instance, in Jamaica. Bowen offers a reminder of different levels of citizen participation and how it has over time grown in importance, at least at the level of rhetoric, to the point where in Jamaica it is considered a requirement in all anti-poverty programmes focused on social and economic infrastructure, social services and organizational capacity building. Bowen considers this to be ‘a bold attempt to use a bottom-up approach to poverty reduction and community development’. The author draws from eight local case studies, equally divided between urban and rural areas to explore both the extent and impact of participation, which included community members contributing very directly to projects by supplying labour, sometimes for payment, or resources, including finance, as well as engaging in discussion about project objectives. It was noticeable that it was in this last area that the level of citizen participation was weakest with most of the decision-making remaining the province of experts. Despite his sense that Jamaica’s approach reflected the way forward in anti-poverty programmes Bowen is nevertheless forced to conclude that to date the reality is that in regard to some key aspects it remains a very limited practice.

In the final article, Elizabeth Coker looks at the complexities of ‘community’ through an unplanned urban neighbourhood in Cairo, Egypt largely populated by displaced migrants in which she explores the relationship between different and competing religious groups and the impact on local mental health services that are largely constructed with a religious label attached. Coker argues that many of the assumptions behind service planning are inappropriate in such contexts and need to be much more in tune with community understandings and orientations, including the
place of religion. The article explores both the tensions, often based on differences of social class, between service providers and the beneficiaries and the ‘deep and pervasive mistrust’ between the different religious groups within the neighbourhood. In particular, it highlights some of the consequences of religiously based services that ultimately fail to meet the needs of the neighbourhood and leave community members ignorant about other local available provision.

In this issue, we also have a classic text written by Carl Milofsky, who is a member of our International Advisory Board. Carl reflects on the importance of Roland L. Warren, a key figure in the development of community sociology in the USA, and focuses in particular on Warren’s 1967 article, ‘The interorganizational field as a focus for investigation’ as this specifically looks at the importance of community. In addition, we have the Spanish and French translations of the abstracts for volume 42.