

PSYCHOLOGY POLITICS RESISTANCE FOUNDING CONFERENCE

PRACTICAL INITIATIVES: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper is to suggest three practical projects to form the focus of PPR's work in the immediate future and to address how we might organise in order to bring these projects to fruition. These projects are chosen on the basis of three criteria. The first is simply their correspondence with the aims of PPR: to address the ways in which psychology is abusive, to contest these uses and to provide practical support to those on the receiving end. The second criterion is practicality. As a new organisation it is preferable to set limited objectives which we are capable of achieving rather than set goals which, however desirable, are beyond our reach. Thirdly, and finally, these suggestions rest on an understanding of PPR as a network which coordinates skills, resources and activities that already exist rather than pretending to create them anew.

1. Responding to the demands of the disempowered

The first, and most important, function of PPR should be to respond insofar as we can to those demands placed upon us by organisations of the oppressed and the exploited. These might take one of two forms: either we may be called upon to contest abusive uses of psychology against such groupings or else we may be asked to provide such psychological 'expertise' as might help them in their struggles. In either case our function will be to mobilise the existing resources that exist in the network rather than pretending to 'create' such expertise anew.

I envisage that such support might be organised as follows. PPR would be approached by an organisation and asked for help in some specific domain. We would then consult our data base containing details as to our membership and their skills and put such individuals as might be able to help in touch with the organisation. A member of the PPR steering committee would take responsibility for coordinating each individual case, following it through and recording any outcomes or lessons to be learnt.

In order for us to be able to undertake such work three things are necessary. The first thing is to get organisations to contact us. This means publicising PPR as widely as possible both amongst groupings of the oppressed and other radical support networks in psychology and beyond (social workers, lawyers etc.). Any contact for PPR must be as accessible as possible and in a position to respond rapidly. Secondly, there needs to be a clear sub-group within the steering committee whose job it is to organise and coordinate this work. It would be best if all members of this grouping has easy access to the data base. Thirdly, we need a thorough data base. This means both a broad membership and thorough information about their capacities. Both of these are, in large part, reliant on those at this conference: fill in the data base forms carefully and help us recruit more members!

One final point needs clarification. An issue which has already arisen and which, no doubt, will continue to arise in the future, concerns the limits of our remit. How are we to decide who is disempowered and when they are subject to abusive uses of psychology? Ideally the question would be resolved organisationally. That is, in general we should prioritise support for, say, anti-deportation campaigns, campaigns to defend those arrested for collective protest, campaigns to contest the criminalisation of young gays and so on, rather than being an individual casework organisation. However it would be wrong to be rigid and there may be cases where individuals

approach us with cases that warrant our support. In order to help decide when this is the case, it should be normal practice that at least two members of the steering committee should discuss individual approaches before making any definitive response.

2. Influencing the public agenda

One of the major ways in which traditional and reactionary perspectives gain their effects is through a virtual monopoly in the media and elsewhere as the 'public voice of psychology'. Thus the British Psychological Society (BPS) operates a media service putting journalists in touch with 'experts' and also, periodically puts out its own papers on issues said to be of psychological relevance. One function of PPR could be to fracture this unitary voice by providing an alternative media service and writing alternative papers.

The former would operate much in the same way as our work in supporting the disempowered. In other words, we would publicise our existence to the media and then, when queries come in, we would use the database to put journalists in touch with suitable members of the PPR network. For this to work, there would need to be a media sub-group of the steering committee whose task it is to both alert the media to our existence and to organise contacts between the media and the network.

The proactive task of writing papers to intervene in public debate would need to function somewhat differently. A model to bear in mind is Elizabeth Newson's recent paper on television and violence in children. Although the paper said nothing new and was a highly partial review of the literature it achieved an impact in large part because it had a seemingly wide range of support. In the case of PPR, papers on relevant political issues (recent examples might include the effects of mine closures upon mental health or the notion of 'gay propaganda' corrupting impressionable youth which was used to support discriminatory legislation) could either be suggested by network members to the steering committee or else the steering committee could use the data base in order to organise the writing of such papers. Once written, the network could also be used to get a wide range of signatories to support any document. Of course, the steering committee would have to use its judgement as to the appropriateness of any document before mobilising the PPR network in its support.

3. Exchanging information and providing support within the network.

As well as using the network to help others, PPR should provide a means of helping network members to support each other - especially in terms of exchanging information. One means of doing this would be for members to be able to seek help from each other through the data base. This could be direct such that all members would have access to the data base. However there may be some information which members would not want to be open access, in which case access could be mediated through the steering committee: a member would ask the committee if there is anyone who can help on a particular issue and they could feed back contacts. A further possibility, which we could explore, would be a PPR computer bulletin board although, of course, this would be limited to those connected to the network.

As well as such bilateral communications PPR should have a newsletter which could include the following: (a) a regular series on the problems of psychology in particular domains: gender, race, sexuality, explanations of dissent etc.etc.. These would include suggested radical readings and build up to be a valuable resource; (b) information on the activities of the network and its members; (c) a media watch on examples of the use (and misuse) of psychology in the public arena (d) announcements of events and reports of events.

In producing the newsletter the priority should be for it to be regular and reliable rather than frequent. We should also aim to distribute it widely as, for many, it will be their first contact point with PPR. One possibility is to try and build up a network of contacts in psychology departments around the country and hence to reach a student market. In many cases, those still training as psychologists are often far more open to alternative ideas than those who have become committed over the years to a particular perspective.

4. Conclusion

To end, we would simply reiterate that this paper is not intended as a policy document simply to be rubber-stamped by the conference. Rather its aim is to stimulate debate and, hopefully, to provide new ideas that will make PPR a more dynamic organisation. These ideas may be in terms of rejecting some of the areas of work suggested here or adding new ones. They might also involved ideas for better implementing some of the areas of work we have suggested. We would welcome both types of discussion. However, finally, we would stress two principles that should guide our deliberations. First of all, be concrete: we have to come out of the day with an agreement as to what our priorities mean in terms of the actual work we do. Secondly, be practical: anything we propose must be realisable within the resources (including the time and effort of those who will have to do the work) that we have available.

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by organising meetings in individual institutions.

- (v) PPR shall seek to contribute symposia and also to arrange fringe meetings at appropriate conferences both within and beyond psychology.
- (vi) In addition to its regular conferences, PPR shall, from time to time, organise special meetings around specific issues - where appropriate in conjunction with other relevant organisations.
- (vii) PPR shall seek to publicise our views through the media and shall provide an alternative network of 'experts' to respond to, comment upon and intervene in public debates.
- (viii) PPR shall publish a regular newsletter.

3. Constitution

- (i) PPR shall have a general meeting at least every two years at which policy will be decided and coordinators elected. This meeting will be the supreme decision making body of the organisation and shall be open to all members. In addition, organisations as invited by the officers or by previous general meetings shall have voting rights on a par with individual members. Contested decisions shall be decided by simple majority vote. Meetings will be called by the coordinators, or an emergency general meeting may be called by 30 members.
- (ii) The general meeting shall elect a coordinating committee to be responsible for the organisation of PPR between meetings. All those eligible to vote will be allowed to make up to six choices and the six individuals obtaining most votes shall be elected. The committee shall meet at least twice a year and meetings shall be open to both members and invited organisations. All attempts will be made to make decisions by consensus. However, in cases of irresolvable difference, only elected committee members will be entitled to vote.
- (iii) The committee shall allocate the following tasks amongst themselves: membership organiser, treasurer, newsletter organiser, conference and meetings organiser, coordinator with outside organisations, press coordinator and campaigns organiser who shall be responsible for arranging members to respond to requests for help. Such others as are willing to help shall be coopted to assist with these tasks.
- (iv) Individual membership shall depend upon payment of an annual membership fee. There will be a sufficient differential between waged and unwaged/low waged rates so as to allow all to participate on equal terms. Initially the fees shall be £4 waged, £2 low/un-waged.
- (v) There shall be a bank account in the name of the organisation. Any two of three named committee (to be named by the committee itself) shall be signatories. Accounts shall be provided to general meetings.
- (vi) All applicants who agree with the aims and objectives of the organisation shall be eligible for membership. Should the committee reject any applicant they will be entitled to appeal to a general meeting for admittance.
- (vii) A newsletter shall be produced at least twice yearly which shall be distributed free to members and sold to non-members. While the newsletter shall seek to be as open as possible and to promote debate, the committee member(s) responsible for the newsletter shall be empowered to reject any material that is contrary to the aims and objectives of the organisation.
- (viii) Any changes to this constitution shall require a two-thirds majority at a properly constituted general meeting