

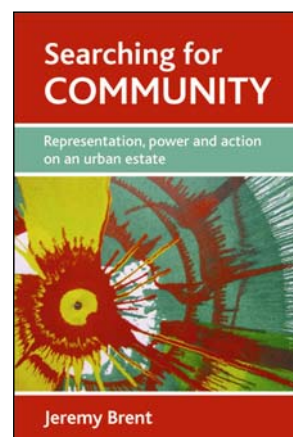
BOOK NOTICE

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SEARCHING FOR COMMUNITY **Representation, power and action on an urban estate** **by Jeremy Brent**



"Jeremy Brent added more than 25 years of work on a single housing estate to his incisive understanding of contemporary social theory to produce the best book on the contested and slippery reality of 'community' to be seen in years. An absolute must!"

Paul Hoggett, Professor of Politics, University of the West of England

What is community?

- **An answer to social problems?**
- **An illusion to be dismissed?**

This insightful study of a Bristol housing estate asks these vital questions and finds the answer lies somewhere between the two. *Searching for community*, by the late Jeremy Brent, is published on 13 May and covers his thirty year involvement as a youth worker in Southmead, a housing estate in Bristol and a place where community feelings run strong.

Community breakdown, especially in cities, is often blamed for youth crime, social marginalisation, gang culture and violence. But what is community anyway? From his standpoint as a youth worker, Brent argues that in the modern globalised world, 'community' is an unattainable goal. Forms of community do, however, appear through the ideas, aspirations and actions of an area's residents, their conflicts, and their need to belong.

In the book, Jeremy Brent brings the experience of youth work alive and gives a real 'feel' of what it's like to live in a community like Southmead. He highlights what has been done in Southmead to improve 'community' and examines ways to understand this difficult concept. Based on his experience, he suggests several important ways to engage young people:

- Giving them local networks of support
- Embracing collective activity, especially expression through artistic activities
- Recognising young people as users of public space and involving them in its design
- Recognising the rights and values of young people, involving rather than controlling them

The extracts on the following pages highlight the effectiveness of these approaches.

Social policy often tries to address problems without allowing for the time and work needed for community creation. This book comes from an author who was deeply involved in the subject he writes about, not simply looking in from the sidelines. His work is vital at a time when some young lives are spiralling out of control and laws are created and enforced by a government that can seem distant from day-to-day life.

Price £19.99 pb (ISBN 978 1 84742 323 8), £60.00 hb (ISBN 978 1 84742 324 5)

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Further information

1. **Searching for community** by Jeremy Brent is published by The Policy Press. It is available to buy from www.policypress.org.uk or from Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4YN (01235 465500) price £19.99 (pb), £60.00 (hb) plus £2.75 p&p.
2. **Jeremy Brent** was Senior Youth Worker at Southmead Youth Centre in Bristol for 28 years. He supported his intellectually reflective practice through studies at Birmingham University and the University of the West of England. He published several articles in Community and Youth Work journals. Jeremy was an active member of the Community and Youth Workers Union. He died in 2006.
3. **Paul Hoggett**, Professor of Politics, University of the West of England, Bristol, was closely involved with Jeremy Brent's work. He is available for interview and can be contacted on 0117 328 2932 or email paul.hoggett@uwe.ac.uk.
4. **The Policy Press** is a leading social science publisher based at the University of Bristol and is committed to publishing books that make a difference. For further information or to request a review copy please contact: Jessica Hughes, Marketing Executive at The Policy Press on Tel: 0117 331 4096 or email jessica.hughes@bristol.ac.uk

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Excerpt from Chapter 10:

'Communicating what youth work achieves: the smile and the arch'

"To illustrate my arguments, I will give two very recent examples of youth work practice that demonstrate the importance of outcomes and product to youth work. However, in using these examples, I immediately come up against major problems of claiming 'success' in youth work. Whose success is it, the youth worker's or the young person's? Can we lay claim to young people's growth and achievements? And then, in writing about young people there is a danger of betrayal; the act of writing turns them into objects of scrutiny, rather than the living subjects we value within the relationship. I was reminded of this when, taking a break from writing this article, I met my first 'example' in the street. We exchanged cheery greetings, each pleased to see the other – but here she is, transformed into an example of good practice. I hope she can forgive me.

The smile

My first example is deliberately a small, unspectacular, everyday example of youth work. In many ways, it is a paradigm of the youth work process. A 15-year-old girl starts attending the youth centre. She seems to come not in her own right, but as a shadowy appendage of her boyfriend. She looks miserable and unhappy, and takes no part in any of the activities available in a very active centre – no sport, no arts, no discussions, nothing. Staff note her presence, and are friendly and welcoming, but no plans or goals are made for her. Unlike most other professional work with young people, there is no initial interview, assessment procedure or plan.

Gradually she gets to talk a bit and we find out her name – we'll call her Kelly. Then she starts confiding to one staff member. It is Kelly who chooses to do this – the youth worker does not take it upon himself to 'intervene' with her, though he is ready and able to respond. Over a number of conversations, she tells him how miserable she is, how she feels her father dislikes her, how she has not been at school

for years, how she wants to move out, how she has eating problems; problems for which we possess no solutions. We do organise a meeting for her with a housing worker. There is a serious discussion about getting a flat, with all the pitfalls explained, and questions as to whether this was really what she wants. There is no movement at all in getting a different place to live, and the matter seems to be dropped.

Then, one session after Kelly had been coming to the youth centre for about six months, she smiles. She even smiles at me, although my contact with her has been minimal.

Now Kelly throws herself into the life of the centre. She plans, but does not execute, a display of photos of all the youth club members. She is planning a trip to a theme park for 20 young people. She is active. She is articulate. She enters into social relations with young people and adults. She is part of something. She looks well.

How can we measure this success? There has been no product, no target met, no plan completed, yet all the evidence points to there being a profoundly important personal outcome for Kelly. It is the sort of episode that is the bread and butter of youth work, yet it is nothing we can give a certificate for, nothing to gain public recognition by. There may be outcomes for her in years to come – better relationships, better health, fewer drugs – but these we do not and cannot know. Still, that smile is so important; a real achievement, a triumph of good youth work.

The arch

Over the years, there have been a number of deaths of young people who have attended the youth centre: car and motorbike accidents, drug-related deaths, suicides, a collapsed trench on a building site, cystic fibrosis. Young death is particularly hard to deal with, and deaths that occurred 20 or 30 years ago still bear a great burden of grief. So the idea grew of converting a scrap of land outside the building into a garden of remembrance with, in its centre, some kind of monument.

No one knew how to make such a monument, so we employed a sculptor. He had a wide brief: to design and construct, with young people, something for the garden. He provided scraps of metal, sculpture books and a computer programme to experiment with designs. After much discussion, a young man whose brother had died on Christmas day from a drugs cocktail very carefully made a maquette of a double arch, which became the chosen design.

We wanted young people to be involved in the construction, but the main structure of the arch had to be made in a metalwork shop. Young people could not do this, but they were part of this adult process. When the completed frame was delivered, the young people were amazed at how the 15cm-high model had been turned into a 2.5m monument. The next stage was to embellish it with more steel. The room in which this was done throbbled with activity, as young people cut, shaped and welded metal. The project took on its own energy. When new young people came to the room to demand what was going on, it was not the staff or sculptor who explained what was happening, but young people who talked about the deaths and the purpose of the arch.

The project was very physical. One young man, whom I had seen self-anaesthetised with drink and drugs at the funeral of his brother (killed in a motorbike accident), was dripping sweat as he sawed through chunks of steel to give the arch the fruit of his effort. This was *doing* something, *creating* something, not just talking about it. It was the first time that I think he had properly grieved.

The arch, now installed, looks very splendid. People come to visit it, even though the garden around is as yet uncultivated mud.

This has been a powerful piece of youth work. The point of describing it for this article, however, was that it had a *product*. In fact, it *needed* a product. The process, the relationships with young people were immensely important – the fact, for example, that the arch was made by them, not just commissioned from the sculptor (and he, who had been unsure of the process, was bowled over by the power and creativity these relationships unleashed). The product did not get in the way of the process, and the project can partly be judged by its product.

The value of the arch far outweighs the value of any accreditation that could have been given to the young people for having taken part. In fact, accreditation in this context would have been demeaning. Certificates would have detracted from the importance of the arch as something worth doing for itself, and devalued the emotional depth of its content.

We could surmise the learning outcomes of the young people involved, but that feels almost sacrilegious. They were personal to them. I would not dream of asking them, let alone giving them a questionnaire to fill in. The project had, as so often in youth work, unrecordable outcomes, outcomes that cannot be encompassed by any evaluation form.