



What is my responsibility to my community? Civic virtues in an age of austerity

Sarah Banks

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



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Sarah Banks, Durham University, UK, s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk

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This paper is a brief summary of some of the main points of the presentation I will give at the *Virtue in the Public Sphere* Conference in Oxford in January 2018.

Introduction

‘What is my responsibility to my community?’ is a perennial question, grounded in human sociality, vulnerability and inter-dependence. It is also a particularly pertinent question today in the context of austerity in Britain (and many other countries), as welfare benefits for people who are sick, disabled and unemployed are cut and eligibility conditions tightened, and the provision of some public services is being transferred from the local state to civil society organisations. This shifting of the burden of support from the state to individuals, families and communities has been termed ‘responsibilisation’ by some commentators (Juhila et al 2017), a term that captures the fact that responsibility is often being given or imposed, rather than voluntarily taken.

The presentation will consider ‘civic virtues’ in the context of two types of neighbourhood-based community activities in ‘deprived’ areas under austerity: community activism (targeted action for change, campaigns, protests); and community service delivery (community organisations filling gaps in social care, advice, library and leisure services, for example). I will discuss the usefulness of Tessman’s (2005) concept of ‘burdened virtues’, which raises a very important question about whether there are there limits to, and burdens on, moral goodness under adverse conditions of oppression, ‘where the external or background conditions necessary for flourishing will tend to be lacking or diminished’ (p. 159)? I will argue that the concept of ‘burdened virtues’ has some purchase in the context of community activism, although with some modifications. I will suggest a parallel concept of ‘managed virtues’ in relation to community service delivery, highlighting the dangers of co-option to government-led agendas. Examples from community-based practice in the Teesside and Tyneside areas of North East England will be used, drawing on action research undertaken by Durham University’s Centre for Social Justice and Community Action in partnership with local community organisations.

Burdened virtues

This discussion takes as its starting point Lisa Tessman’s (2005) concept of ‘burdened virtues’, as outlined in her book: *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. She developed this concept in the context of exploring the moral demands on people who have direct experience of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia) in engaging in ‘liberatory struggles’. ‘Burdened virtues’ are character traits that are disjoined from their bearers’ own flourishing and carry a moral cost to those who practise them. Tessman identifies and discusses three virtues that support liberatory struggles: (righteous) anger, (critical) loyalty and courage. She argues that the cultivation and exercise of these virtues can place an intolerable burden on activists who are the victims or survivors of oppression.

Tessman's examples are largely from social movements based around communities of identity (e.g. Black power, lesbian and feminist movements) and it is clear that this is the context in which her ideas have developed, stimulated in part by her own past activism.

There are many features of Tessman's account that are open to criticism, including: her under-developed concept of human flourishing; whether some of the burdened virtues, especially anger, are more like vices than virtues; and whether the right type and amount of the virtues associated with courage or loyalty are any more difficult to achieve in liberatory struggles than in other areas of life, such as military service. However, the idea that people who are themselves experiencing extreme discrimination, destitution or violence are exposed to further moral costs in exercising the virtues required for collective action is an important consideration. And this is a different point from the more obvious and accepted arguments: 1) that people in extreme circumstances do not have the time, energy or head-space to engage in organised struggles; or 2), as presented by Tessman herself in the first part of the book, that the oppressed self may be morally damaged, prevented from developing or exercising the virtues.

'Deprived' communities

My interest in burdened virtues is in the context of groups of people taking action in relation to communities of place (neighbourhoods). The term 'community' is highly contested and contestable (Banks and Butcher 2013, Plant 1974, Somerville 2016), but for the purposes of this paper I will offer a very generic description of 'community' as a group of people who have some things, but not everything, in common. In the case of communities of place, the key feature people have in common is the location where they live, which may have numerous diverse and sometimes conflicting sub-communities of identity and interest based around associative activities (e.g. play groups, youth clubs, places of worship, schools, pubs, ethnic groups, facebook groups). In this presentation I will focus on neighbourhoods categorised as 'deprived', that is, with higher concentrations of people who are unemployed and on low incomes, and with poorer housing and facilities. These are also neighbourhoods that are particularly affected by the economic downturn following the 2008 financial crisis and by public sector austerity measures, including welfare reform (changes to the welfare benefits system) and withdrawal of state-provided services.

The role of community organisations

In the climate of austerity, government is looking to third sector organisations (not-for-profits or non-governmental organisations) and private business to take over the delivery of some services and to stimulate and support volunteering and a sense of civic responsibility amongst citizens. Whilst there are many large regional and national NGOs in the frame, government policy is also clearly geared towards the role of smaller, locally based community organisations, including those described as 'under the radar' (usually small organisations, perhaps with no charity registration or paid workers) (McCabe and Phillimore 2017). A government discussion paper on the role of the voluntary and community sector in deprived neighbourhoods (Department for Communities and Local Government and Third Sector Partnership Board Task and Finish Group on Deprived Neighbourhoods 2010) argues for the

‘transformative role’ of the sector, describing it as ‘virtually without limit’ – clearly indicating a co-option of smaller community organisations to achieve policy objectives as enshrined in the 2011 Localism Act (McCabe 2017: 74).

In this presentation I will consider the cultivation and exercise of ‘civic virtues’ (those pertaining to people playing roles in democratic and associative life outside their own private and family spheres) in relation to the activities of neighbourhood based community organisations (small, but above the radar). I will consider two types of activities:

1. **Community activism** – where community-based coalitions, networks, social movements and campaigning groups are mounting challenges to policies and practices viewed as unjust and damaging, including issues related to public austerity as well as many others. These are *claimed spaces* (community-owned spaces, with the agenda set by the community organisations themselves). *Burdened virtues*, e.g. courage, loyalty, righteous anger.
2. **Community service delivery** – co-option and manipulation of groups of people to ameliorate social problems in the context of state withdrawal of services – e.g. ‘My Community’ (Dept for Communities and Local Government) ‘community rights information’ and small grant programmes for neighbourhood planning, taking over community buildings, building houses or engaging in community economic development. These are *invited spaces* (spaces for decisions and actions that are owned and controlled by others into which communities are invited). *Managed virtues*, e.g. resilience, ‘grit’, social responsibility.

Community activism

In looking at community activism, I will examine Tessman’s burdened virtues, considering the three virtues she presents, anger, loyalty and courage, and the extent to which it makes sense to characterise them as ‘burdened’ in the way she suggests. I will consider other relevant virtues associated with expressions of solidarity and care, and the concept of ‘healing justice’ advocated by Black Lives Matter (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/healing-justice/>). I will illustrate with examples from community organising, an approach to tackling injustice through coalitions of organisations adopting a strategic approach to challenging those in power on very specific issues (Alinsky 1969, Beck and Purcell 2013, Bunyan 2010, Pyles 2009, Walls 2015). I will refer to the work of Thrive Teesside, a small community organisation based in Stockton-on-Tees with a commitment to tackling poverty. I will use as a particular example an action-research project designed to work on indebtedness in low income households, called *Debt on Teesside* (www.dur.ac.uk/socialjustice/researchprojects/debt_on_teesside/). This involved the use of a community organising model to influence changes in unethical lending practices of high-cost lenders and government regulation of very high interest rates (Banks 2015, Banks et al 2013, Banks et al 2017). Traditional community organising as developed by Saul Alinsky (1969, 1989) in Chicago in the 1940s has been criticised for its use of anger and provocative tactics to agitate residents and frame winnable issues. For example, he urges organisers to ‘rub raw the resentments of the people of the community’, ‘fan the latent hostilities’ and ‘search out controversy’ (Alinsky, 1989, p. 116). In this guise it fits the description of ‘liberatory struggles’ given by Tessman and her account of burdened virtues is

relevant. However, alternative versions of community organising, including transformative and feminist organising, also pay careful attention to the material and psychological needs of activists, including and the cultivation of self-care, changes in consciousness, personal transformation and healing justice (Macy and Johnstone 2012, Pyles 2018) . I will consider whether in this context the burdened virtues of loyalty, anger and courage may be less burdensome, while the activism also maintains its power and dynamism. Discussion will be illustrated with reference to campaigns and public assemblies involving people experiencing high levels of indebtedness.

Community service delivery

Initially the idea of ‘burdened virtues’ seemed as if it might have some purchase in the context of community groups based in poor neighbourhoods being invited to take on the running or co-production of former council buildings and services, as well as in community activism as described above. However, on closer examination the two types of activity have important differences and require the cultivation of different types of virtue. One difference is that in community service delivery, the community organisations are being called into what Gaventa (2006) calls ‘invited spaces’ (spaces for decisions and actions that are owned and controlled by others into which communities are invited). Here the power to set and control the overall agenda is not in the hands of the community organisations, despite the rhetoric of community rights and choice. The virtues required to occupy those invited spaces and perform well are very different from those needed in the ‘claimed spaces’ of community activism (community-owned spaces, when the agenda is set by the community organisations themselves). This led me to wonder whether the virtues of community service delivery under austerity might be characterised as ‘managed virtues’.

In this section of the presentation I will illustrate with examples from a second community-university research partnership project called *Imagine – connecting communities through research* (www.dur.ac.uk/socialjustice/imagine/). This involved Durham University’s Centre for Social Justice and Community Action working with 12 community-based organisations based in Benwell (West End of Newcastle) and part of North Shields looking at civic participation since the 1970s in areas classified as ‘deprived’. In this presentation I will draw largely on examples from Benwell, including a small youth organisation taking over a former Council Play Centre building as an asset transfer and a partnership of local organisations that developed an ‘Our Place’ plan according to specifications from central government that could not be implemented due to lack of resources and commitment from the local authority.

Implications for practice

Tessman (2005, p. 9) apologises for the pessimism of her account, which focuses on moral life under and in resistance to persistent oppression and emphasises the limitations and burdens of this life, rather than on strategies for achieving victory over oppression or sparking hope for liberation. However, her account is useful in drawing attention to the moral damage of struggles against oppression. By linking Tessman’s analysis to some of the currently experienced community-based struggles and the recent attention to paid to the moral qualities of self-care and healing justice, hopefully a more optimistic

account of community activism and a more wary account of community service delivery can be developed.

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