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Review: The essential U&I

An invited review.

Review of Wadsworth, Yoland, ed. (2001) *The essential U&I*. Melbourne: Victoria Health Promotion Foundation. ISBN 0-9579990-0-3. [pp 225 + xi] Au$27.50

That's the short version of the title, above. To give it its full title …

The essential U&I: a one-volume presentation of the findings of a lengthy grounded study of whole systems change towards staff-consumer collaboration for enhancing mental health services. By Yoland Wadsworth, ed., in on-going collaboration with Merinda Epstein. Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2001.

It's a quarto-sized paperback which crams more information into its 225 pages than you might imagine. It contains some important information and messages

for anyone involved in any role in the mental health system. I believe it also has something important to say to all of us who inhabit organisations of any form.

Even before you open the cover the title is revealing. As the *"essential" U&I* it is a summary of five previous research reports. Together they detail a substantial action research study conducted between 1989 and 1996 under the auspices of the VMIAC, the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council, an advocacy group for mental health consumers. Most of the book consists of extracts from those research reports and other documents. Occasional commentary threads together the extracts and draws conclusions from them.

The *"U&I"* of the title serves double duty. It is shorthand for "Understanding and involvement", which captures well the participative action research style of the study. It also (deliberately) stands for the "you and I" — those for whom the study sought to improve understanding. The you and the I are staff and consumers, or consumers and staff, depending on your perspective.

(I should mention that "consumers" is the label preferred by many of those who have been the willing or unwilling clients of the mental health system. Some choose "survivors" as a more appropriate label.)

The author, Yoland Wadsworth is well known among action researchers as a committed researcher who favours strongly participative and action oriented approaches to research. A sociologist by training, she has written two influential, practical and readable books which have achieved wide currency: *Do it yourself social research* and *Everyday evaluation on the run*. This isn't as readable as those books. If it leads to action it may well prove to be more important.

The study in overview

An initial study *Understanding, anytime* (henceforth *U,A*) was an evaluation by mental health consumers of acute psychiatric facilities at Royal Park Hospital in Parkville. Consumers' views about the hospital were gathered and conveyed to

staff for their comment. Those comments were fed back to the consumers. The consumers in turn developed recommendations, which were communicated to staff.

In parallel with this process, staff were asked for their views about their own practice. These views were conveyed to consumers.

The more elaborate *Understanding and involvement* study (henceforth *U&I*) initially used reactions to *U,A* as a catalyst for further engagement. It took as its goal the fostering of communication between consumers and staff. Much of the book describes the many mechanisms that were set in place and the results that were achieved.

Importantly, the communication between staff and consumers was not to be limited to what occurred within the research study. Attempts were made, with mixed success, to embed it in the operation of psychiatric services. Further, it was not to be limited to Royal Park. It was to develop a model or framework which would be extended system-wide.

It was a mixed success, though better than I would have anticipated. Beyond this I won't attempt to summarise further what is already a summary of substantial documentation. Read the book.

The study as research

As I read (and sometimes judiciously skimmed) this account, several features of this study *as research* stood out for me. The book is worth reading as an example of a study which capitalises on the features of action research.

For instance I liked the strong commitment towards giving consumers a voice — more than that, an active involvement — in the research. This was done in a way which did not victimise staff.

The flexibility of participative action research was also used to good effect. The researchers and their allies persisted with what worked. They modified what didn't. They refined the mechanisms and the processes as the study proceeded. Much good action research, I think, is emergent — it develops over time as understanding grows. *U&I* is an exemplary instance of how this may be done.

Contribution to understanding

It is also painfully apparent in much of *U&I* that we are not very good at building psychiatric institutions which are human and humane. Institutions are strong cultures which seem almost to force staff and consumers into roles which are not ultimately good for either. A repeated question throughout the study is "Why is it so hard?". Why indeed?

I am reminded of Philip Zimbardo's prison experiment at Stanford in 1971. Most readers will probably have come across it. The study allocated eighteen volunteers at random to be either prisoners or prison guards. By the sixth day Zimbardo abandoned the study because the "guards" were behaving in a controlling and punitive way towards the "prisoners". For those unfamiliar with it, Kathleen O'Toole (1997) provides an impelling account.

Closer to home, Tony Vinson (1982) provides a further example of how hard it is. He has documented his very evident success in managing a high security prison in NSW. His frustration is also evident. He had little effect in spreading his innovations to other prisons. Psychiatric institutions, it appears, are also strongly armoured against change.

Prison roles, it seems, tap into something resembling archetypes in the human psyche. This book indicates that mental health roles may be similarly archetypical.

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I have had little to do with mental health or prison systems. Despite that, I expect that people in those fields, whether staff or consumers, will enhance their understanding through reading this book. Its application, though, is wider than that. Some parallels with my own experience in very different systems are apparent. Some examples follow.

It's clear from the *U&I* study that understanding isn't enough to bring about change. Without the intention to do something about the present, nothing happens. Unless that intention is accompanied by passion, still nothing happens.

Even understanding and intention and passion together may not be sufficient. Throughout *U&I* multiple mechanisms are used. Many ways of communicating were devised, and many locations in which this might happen. Depending on any one point of leverage may be inadequate. Multiple points of leverage may increase the success rate.

In most systems — in almost all, I suspect — there are those with privilege and power and those without. Those with privilege can usually find some reason not to change. My belief is that power and privilege are at least partly invisible to those who have it: sometimes even to those on whom it is exercised. Even where it is visible and acknowledged, people find ways of rationalising its existence. In most systems, roles are powerful. In total institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons the roles are even stronger.

Beyond this, I think it is when people experience each other as real people that they are best able to see beyond their roles. They are then more motivated to act for the benefit of all. It is not enough that people communicate. Unless the communication is person to person the roles are likely to remain unchallenged or at least excused.

It takes time and energy to interact and to understand and to experience each other as real. Yet in many systems that necessary time is seen as not really work.

We define productivity or effectiveness very narrowly, and treat the time for communication as "slack time" or waste, or at best as a luxury. It gets pushed aside by the day by day requirements which are treated as imperatives. My view is that systems need "slack" time. It provides the lubrication which in the end allows systems to function more effectively and enjoyably.

There is much to be said for research programs or change programs which model a different way of doing things. *U&I* talks about resistance in some quarters to using consumers and ex-consumers as researchers. With their involvement legitimised by the study, they were able to be heard and to be influential. A research program (especially a participative action research program, I think) can be a useful vehicle for creating a sort of counter culture which exists alongside the conventional culture.

In summary ...

If it is not already evident, let me be clear that I found this an informative and valuable report. It could have been even more valuable, I believe. I understand that there were deadlines — the study reports that there were only 46 days for Yoland and a group of staff and consumers to select the excerpts and decide how to present them. I think the haste shows.

I expected *U&I* to be an easy read. Instead it was difficult. This was partly due to the sheer amount of material. Partly, it was that the commentaries for me didn't successfully pull it all together.

Although Chris Argyris is mentioned and some of his work is cited, it is little more than a mention in passing. Yet I was struck by how pointedly his models and processes address many of the issues which partly undermined the intended outcomes of the study. He has argued (1990, for example) that unless the within-person and between person and system dynamics are addressed, the status quo

tends to prevail. He offers many models and processes which I think could have further illuminated the situations described in this study.

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Let me sum up. Don't expect this to be bedtime reading. In the end I was left with the impression that such a study deserved a more reader-friendly report.

I think, though, that you will find it worth the effort. If, like me, you believe that our organisations are in poor shape, this is a book which will increase your understanding. It has relevance in areas well beyond mental health. If, like me, you are looking to expand your strategies for bringing about change, you will find plenty here to suggest ways for doing so. If you wish to further develop ways of doing research which is both grounded in reality and which engages the people who will be affected by it, you will find here a fine example indeed.

— Bob Dick

Argyris, Chris (1990) *Overcoming organisational defenses: facilitating organisational learning*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

O'Toole, Kathleen (1997) The Stanford prison experiment: still powerful after all these years. *Stanford News*, 8 January 1997. Available on line: http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/relaged/970108prisonexp.html. [Downloaded 1 November 2002.]

Vinson, Tony (1982) *Wilful obstruction: the frustration of prison reform*. North Ryde: Methuen Australia.