

THEory into ACTion

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Interview with Helen Louise Azzara, Creative Facilitator with a Master's degree in Creativity Studies and PhD Candidate at Pacifica Graduate Institute

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"We do have this natural ability, through play and through expression, to change things"
- Helen Louise Azzara

As a student in an advanced Community Psychology course at DePaul, I wanted to learn how to use creativity to help others, therefore, I searched online for information on community psychologists who use creativity in their work. My search led me to Helen Louise Azzara who is a creative facilitator, and is presently working on her dissertation exploring the value of creative arts in dementia care. In the interview, Helen Louise shared her journey that led her to the field of community psychology and how she incorporates art and creativity in her work with communities.

While pursuing an acting career for nearly 20 years in New York City, she re-discovered her love of psychology and became a certified psychosynthesis practitioner (a transpersonal psychology). While completing her certification, she experienced the powerful effect the creative process has in helping people develop a greater understanding of self, their relationships and the world they live in. In 2001 she founded *The Heart of Creativity* program, facilitating workshops throughout the New York metropolitan area.

In 2007 she earned a Masters of Science in Creative Studies from SUNY Buffalo State's International Center for Studies in Creativity (ICSC), and is currently enrolled in a PhD program for Depth Psychology with emphasis in Community Psychology, Liberation Psychology and Ecopsychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California.

Helen Louise had never heard of community psychology until attending Pacifica. During her three years of formal classes, her fieldwork projects involved working in community settings that focused on conducting creativity programs for older adults diagnosed with dementia. It was while doing this work, she realized she has been a community psychologist all along "I was doing it, but I didn't know I was doing it. I was very

involved with the communities and teaching them various ways to handle stress or use conflict resolution,” says Azzara.

At Pacifica, Helen Louise was able to focus on the concepts of well-being and learn more about community psychology as a field of study. “It has led me now to deepen my study of dementia, and how we as a society can provide better resources to help improve their quality of life. So I see myself more working in the field as a community psychologist rather than an ecopsychologists. However, I do think they are all interdependent on one another.”

Helen Louise has found that creativity studies seem to have an inherent connection to community psychology. When she started her work, using creativity as a forum to open dialogue and to manage stress, bringing it into community contexts was novel. She loves creativity workshops and using them with different groups—artists, social workers, health professionals, older adults, caretakers—there are a lot of different venues where creativity does link, where everyone comes together and solves problems more through self expression. Creative mediums using improvisation, poetry, painting, dance, theatre games, listening to music, and silent meditations are some of the ways in which can bring community together and deepen connections. Moreover, such workshops incorporate many community psychology values such as the strength-based approach, collaboration, and empowerment. According to Helen Louise the workshops promote self-awareness and collective efficacy towards addressing participants’ challenges and expressing everyone’s voices.

In conducting conflict resolution workshops with social workers, Helen Louise has been inspired by the work of Augusto Boal (c), the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed. She uses many of his improvisation techniques such as “sculpture” (using the body to create an image of an oppressive situation or emotion), theatre games, and role play to create a community-oriented space. According to Helen Louise, the workshops promote cohesion among group members who report feeling much more harmonious, more together, more open to listening and solving problems together. “It is a bridge that brings the community to a place of coexistence where we can hear, respect and value each other. And we are all there for the same reasons, for our own well-being, for our loved ones and beyond. To help people.”

Her fieldwork in an adult daycare allowed her to bring creativity and workshops to the center [for people with dementia]. “It was quite lovely to see everyone getting together and seeing the positive changes.” In addition, Helen Louise has lived in a small residential facility for eight days in the New England area to experience what it is like to live in an actual home for people with dementia. Now, she is looking forward to getting involved with the Alzheimer’s Association (<http://www.alz.org/>) and volunteering with them in the near future. Her dissertation focuses on researching dementia care and she hopes to work with memory care communities of Santa Barbara.

Helen Louise's involvement with communities allows her to participate and experience a sense of empathy among her clients and according to her, empathy is a big part of her work. Azzara comes from a depth psychological point of view, which means one has to look at his or her own unconscious patterns of behaviors, attitudes and biases. According to Helen Louise empathy is not something that is revered in this country as much as it should be. To her, empathy promotes more understanding, kindness, caring and patience; we are able to see and hear the other and have respect for diversity. This, to her, is especially important for community psychologists to whom empathy may also mean *inclusion*. As community psychologists, we should ask ourselves: "What are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? Who is benefiting from this work?" Who is making the decisions? "Am I able to make a positive impact?" Is my work ameliorative or is it transformative? In other words, to borrow community psychologists' Nelson and Prilleltensky's concept, am I participating in placing a temporary band aide over a problem or situation, or does this work have the potential to create real change for individuals and within the community.

When Azzara reflects on one of the turning points of her career, she recalls a child that she worked with many years ago as a social worker. The child was a young girl about nine years old and she was not able to talk. At that point, Helen Louise had not yet explored creativity in her work, but decided to use it to let the client express herself. Through self-expression, Helen Louise empowered her to take more control of her own treatment, which included various types of artistic media such as art and dance. Over the course of three months, the client began to show progress and eventually started to sing and talk. It was a profound, life-changing experience that helped Helen Louise realize why creativity was powerful for healing. The transformations happen over and over again and this is why the work is always new and fresh. Someone is always affected. People can work together, understand differences and see the other *and* themselves. This interview sheds light on the possibilities of community transformation through art, creativity, and self-expression. Imagine the change that may occur throughout a community when community psychology practitioners begin to fully utilize strategies of creativity.