

Defining And Measuring ‘Empowerment’ In Community Based Projects

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‘Empowerment’, like community, is one of those terms that everyone seems to agree with but which turns out to be equally difficult to pin down. Inglis (1997) suggests that ‘empowerment’ involves the ability to adapt and cope with change at an individual level, which he contrasts with ‘emancipation’ which involves structural change with a collective impact. In the current policy context for community education, where resourcing is dependent on proving outcomes, it is important to be clear about how empowerment is defined and how evidence for its attainment can be measured. One useful starting place is to think of empowerment and emancipation as ends of a spectrum. In this sense, there may be outcomes that tend towards people being more empowered or tend towards people being more emancipated. But before community educators can gauge the impact of their work, it is necessary to be clear about what we mean by power itself as this will enable us to assess what empowerment and emancipation entail and how community education makes a contribution to these outcomes.

Power and empowerment: a relational perspective

How we think about power will shape what we understand empowerment to mean. In this article I argue that making power visible is a step towards empowerment and, arguably, a step towards emancipation. Illuminating how power can structure and shape experience is important particularly if individuals and groups have not thought about their experience in such terms.

In developing a relational view of power, a useful starting point is the distinction between *power over* and *power to*. *Power over* refers to the ability of the powerful to achieve favourable outcomes for themselves, particularly where there is a conflict of interests and they have the capacity to further their own. In this case, working with

powerless groups might involve developing resistance to the interests and claims of the powerful, and the more successful community groups are at doing this the greater their degree of empowerment.

Power to is about enhancing the resources and capacity of individuals and groups to achieve their objectives. The powerless can enhance their capacity to act individually or collectively to better articulate, define and promote their interests. Empowerment in these terms connotes a positive capacity to make changes due to improved resources, new knowledge and skills, or new outlooks, attitudes and behaviour. In this process the role of power in limiting expectations and shaping expectations and behaviour can become visible. This visibility may result in latent conflict of interests becoming consciously recognised and subsequent individual or collective action taken to transform the situation.

The relational nature of power relationships requires that for empowerment to occur a shift needs to occur in the balance of power. For instance in a patriarchal society men benefit at the expense of women; in a capitalist society, capitalists benefit at the expense of workers. What is a central issue is that, in a situation where there is a conflict of interest, the powerful have to lose some power for the powerless to be empowered (i.e. the relationship is a zero-sum one) (O'Hagan 1991). If there are winners there have to be losers too. It is this relational view of power which I will explore through the radical three-dimensional analysis of power presented by Steven Lukes (1974).

In Lukes' analysis the first dimension of power involves the capacity of individuals and groups to achieve favourable decisions for themselves. Power in this sense is usually visible at least in terms of the outcomes of decisions with dominant individuals and groups usually having decision-making power. This may include teachers in school, health workers, local councillors, employers or a host of other individuals and groups who occupy roles and positions which can affect people's lives.

The second dimension is the ability of powerful groups to limit what are deemed to be legitimate grievances which need to be acted on. Subordinate groups may have genuine concerns and problems but those in power are able to marginalise and ignore their claims when decisions are made. The routine dismissal of individuals or groups from having a legitimate stake in an issue, for example the treatment of young people as being unready to participate in important decisions, might be an example of this. Conflict in this sense may be visible on the margins but is usually not overt and clearly evident.

The third dimension of power refers to its broader social and cultural exercise which shapes attitudes and expectations so that people accept systemic inequalities as natural or inevitable. Wrongs that need righting are not articulated. The systematic exclusion of people with disabilities from mainstream activities and resources is an example of this. The activity of disability groups and the disability movement has challenged such routine exclusion by challenging the cultural politics of everyday life that legitimate the pervasive exercise of power through culturally powerful assumptions. The third dimension of power is very economical in the sense that it does not require the mobilisation of resources for enforcement; often it simply relies on self-limitation or self-censorship.

In terms of the empowerment-emancipation spectrum the first dimension must therefore involve the capacity of the powerless to influence and change decisions where there are conflicts of interests. If the nature of these decisions has an impact at an institutional or societal level, rather than an individual one, the tendency is towards the emancipatory end of the spectrum. If it is more local or individual then it is empowering.

In relation to the second dimension a shift in the balance of power occurs when the grievances of powerless groups become more visible and legitimate rather than being sidelined or unheard. The outcome of bringing the issue or grievance to light and the legitimate role of individuals or groups to have a voice in it should be regarded as significant in that the underlying relations of power and powerlessness are beginning

to change. When the agenda for decision-making is influenced to include the grievances of the powerless this could be assessed in the same way as in the first dimension of power.

In the third dimension the significance of the impact of changes involved can be more difficult to assess and measure in the short-term. Transforming attitudes and perceptions may have an emancipatory impact in terms of new social and cultural practices which equalise social relations at a collective and structural level. If such change occurs – which is often a long-term and macro level process – it can be said to have a wider zero-sum effect in that the balance of power between social groups alters to the advantage of the powerless. But at the level of community projects the changes may only occur at an interpersonal level or, for example, at an individual level in terms of enhanced confidence and skills without leading to overt conflicts of interest. These outcomes can be personally empowering and are significant even though they may not involve emancipatory systemic change.

The research study¹

In order to assess what contributions community interventions made to the development of social capital a small research project was commissioned. In undertaking this powerless individuals and groups were asked to identify any changes that had improved their life and to rank the significance of the change in terms of the degree to which things had improved (no change / small change / big change).

The evidence being asked for included participants' meanings as well as concrete examples of changes made. Respondents were also asked to what extent changes could be attributed to their involvement in community projects. Interviews were undertaken with 21 participants in a small number of community learning and development agencies that represented a range of practice in relation to the focus of provision and participants. These included a young mother's group, a grandparents

¹ The research project was related to the development of social capital in equalities projects and was commissioned by Learning Scotland in 2007. The main focus of interest here is the experience of empowerment and emancipation.

parenting again group, community capacity building projects, a project working with ethnic minorities, a second chance to learn literacies group, a youth project and an adult learning group working in a broadly Freirean-style project. The data below reflects their perceptions and assessments of their ability to influence powerful others in situations where manifest and latent conflicts of interest existed.

The first dimension of power – empowerment against those who take decisions

The main authority figures identified as taking decisions which affected respondents' lives included the government, the justice system, the local council and the various people who carry out their work. In addition, the procedures of bureaucracies, solicitors creating legal obstacles, or influencing the council to carry out repairs, are indicative of a range of powerful others and decision making areas which had a significant impact on everyday life but were difficult for people to challenge and change.

Being patronised by professionals and politicians was a common experience, which in turn made it difficult to influence the decisions and actions of those in authority and power. Not having a clear understanding of how decisions are taken, the anonymity of people who are sometimes in control, or who are difficult to access, were also critical factors in feelings of powerlessness. The cultural politics of family life was commented on in one case through the experience of being observed and assessed by social workers, in the home, in relation to tidiness and parenting practices.

But had involvement in community projects helped in any way? What had changed, in only a large minority of cases, involved the following: having more useful information which could help individuals defend their rights over decisions made, having particular contacts they had built relationships with who could be called on for sound advice and support, or having the confidence to use a solicitor or contact a politician with a sense of purpose and determination. Five people specifically attributed this change to the groups they were involved with, or because they knew more groups and people to now help them. For people in poor and marginalised communities the importance of material resources is an important aspect of personal

and group power. However, all but one reported *no change* in their immediate financial circumstances.

The second dimension of power – challenging the agenda

The ability to challenge the agenda of the powerful was identified as having occurred in a minority of cases. However, six people reported a big change in what they could now achieve as an outcome of their experience with the projects. Of this six, three explained that the important factor was being organised collectively: “If I wasn’t in the group, if I was an individual, then it would just be ‘Oh it’s just somebody else moaning’ but because of the group, and because they feel that we’re a group that’s going to start pressurising for things, that they’re starting to listen.” The gains people made through their collective efforts also involved individuals acquiring greater confidence, the ability to communicate more effectively, the capacity to be more assertive, the sharing and identification of their own and others’ knowledge and understanding, the development of their own distinctive expertise. Collective change can also be a vehicle for individual empowerment.

In practical terms such examples given were of acquiring the skills and confidence to challenge a doctor’s decision when previously the individual felt intimidated and ignored, or no longer meekly accepting discriminatory comments from other people at work. Greater willingness to hassle people in authority reflected a shift away from deferential attitudes and an awareness, acumen and capacity to develop sustained actions to lobby decision makers and put forward an alternative agenda for action. Such actions amounted to opening up issues which had been cordoned off and silenced; upsetting the agenda- framing capacity of powerful groups was regarded as success, even if the final decision was unfavourable.

The third dimension of power - Changing expectations and ability to express opinions

Perhaps the most significant contribution in the experience of the sample was in terms of shifting attitudes, opinions, confidence and outlook. Although the exercise of invisible power is enormously powerful and economical it is also potentially vulnerable. It is carried in people’s experiences and beginning to recognise how

power works socially and culturally, by making it visible in experience, is an educational task.

The power to take on new activities and try new things had changed for the vast majority in the sample and included the following claims: feeling empowered in terms of the ability to influence change as part of a group; acquiring confidence and the ability to participate in an interview; communicating ideas to other groups more clearly; developing persistence and resilience to see things through rather than being put off by initial failure; having a much greater awareness of how to create change and to take a longer-term view of it. In relation to expressing their individual opinions, only six reported no change whereas thirteen respondents stated there had been big changes in their ability and willingness to speak out. The importance of the group in developing confidence, assertiveness and being listened to was the main factor in this.

In such a brief 'snapshot' of experience it is difficult to assess the wider impact of these changes. The benefits that resulted might only occur at an interpersonal and individual level rather than producing wider social change, but nevertheless steps towards empowerment in these terms can lead in the direction of emancipation in the long-term.

Conclusion: the impact of the projects on power relations

The results reported above will come as no surprise to many of those working in community education. The biggest change noted by the respondents occurred in attitudes and ability leading to the *power to* think and act differently and where necessary to challenge authority. The important point is that often this work goes unreported or under reported yet the outcomes are significant and can be measured. In order to do this conceptual frameworks have to be applied and developed to give a clearer, systematised and more rigorous account of the nature of power and empowerment and the achievements gained individually and collectively.

In relation to having an impact on decision-makers the reported success was more limited, but when it did happen it occurred primarily by incremental changes through collective effort. Also the sample of projects included in the study may have skewed the results in this respect because the inclusion of a greater number of campaigning organisations would have potentially had a bigger impact on challenging decisions and the agenda of decision makers. However, it seems clear that respondents in the sample had experienced an increase in their *power to act* and this had important empowering benefits for individuals as well as being an essential step in the process of emancipation.

References

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