



Prifysgol Cymru

Y Drindod Dewi Sant

University of Wales

Trinity Saint David

Trawsnewid Addysg, Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education, Transforming Lives

ECAY4004:
Agency, Empowerment and Anti-oppressive Practice
The Concept of Agency
2024



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Session Outcomes:

An introduction to the concept of Agency including:

- The Agency Vs Structure Debate
- Agency and it's relation to Empowerment



Learning Review

What can you remember from our previous session?

- Power

Concepts of Power

- ‘POWER TO’ do something
 - the ability to make a decision and take action. It involves bringing about changes in people’s lives.
- ‘POWER WITHIN’ a person
 - self-confidence and self-awareness, which are often linked to faith and culture. Individuals who have ‘power within’ believe they are able to make positive changes in their own lives. We sometimes say such people are ‘empowered’.
- ‘POWER WITH’ others
 - collective power, which comes about through acting and speaking out jointly. It involves collaboration, organisation and solidarity.
- ‘POWER OVER’ others
 - the power of the strong over the weak. It is a form of control by one person, or a group of people, over others. It includes the power to exclude others.

Agency

Agency as a Sociological concept

- Agency refers to the idea that people make their own decisions and are responsible for their own actions
- Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to exercise their power and resources in fulfilling their potential.
- It encompasses the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual autonomy and ability to shape their own experiences.

(Dépelteau, 2008; Barker, 2005; see also Giddens, 1979; Elder-Vass, 2010; Bandura, 1999; Durkheim, 2001).

What does Agency mean?

‘Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves, and also to help the world, and these matters are central to the process of development’ (Sen, 1999 p.152)

‘Acting freely and being able to choose... are conducive to well-being’ (Sen, 1999 p.152)

‘The ability to affect events outside one’s immediate sphere of influence’ (Ling and Dale, 2014)

(Dépelteau, 2008; Barker, 2005; see also Giddens, 1979; Elder-Vass, 2010; Bandura, 1999; Durkheim, 2001).



Structure Vs Agency Debate

- Does agency come from individual choice or from the structure of society?
 - Agency represents a person's free will, freedom of choice, and independent action.
 - It is the ability to impose one's will on the world and determine one's own destiny.
 - In contrast, social structure refers to the various constraints placed on individuals by society, including factors such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity and customs.



Micro	Macro
Agency	Structure
Individual Choice “Free Will”	Social Forces
Solidarity	Social Control

Structure Vs Agency Debate

- Agency as a concept, has been closely linked to the contradictory views of individual freedom for people to make their own and a stable social order. This is defined as the agency v structure debate.
- Structure refers to the factors that promote or hinder a person's ability to act with agency. These are not limited to institutions or laws, but are also characteristic structures in society, such as social class, age, gender, ethnicity, genetics etc.

Social Structures

- **Structure** refers to the complex and interconnected set of social forces, relationships, institutions, and other elements that shape human behaviour.
- It includes factors like **social class, religion, gender, ethnicity** and **customs** that determine or limit individuals' decisions.

Dialectical Relationship

- Sociologists view the relationship between structure and agency as an **ever-revolving dialectic**.
- A **dialectic** implies that while social structure shapes individuals, individuals also shape structure.
- Society is a **Social Creation**, and maintaining social order requires cooperation among individuals connected through social relationships.

Reaffirmation vs. Remaking of Social Order

- Individual and collective agency can either reaffirm social order by reproducing existing norms and relationships or challenge and remake social order by creating new norms.
- Examples include rejecting gendered dress norms individually or advocating for expanded marriage definitions collectively.

Disenfranchised Populations

- When studying disenfranchised and oppressed populations, it's essential to recognise their agency.
- Despite structural constraints, individuals within these groups still have the ability to make decisions and express them in behaviour.

Structure Vs. Agency: Summary

- In summary, agency and social structures are intertwined, with individuals navigating their lives within the context of broader societal forces

<i>MICRO</i>	<i>MACRO</i>
<i>Agency</i>	<i>Structure</i>
<i>Individual Choice</i> <i>"Free Will"</i>	<i>Social</i> <i>Forces</i>
<i>Solidarity</i>	<i>Social Control</i>

(Dépelteau, 2008; Barker, 2005; see also Giddens, 1979; Elder-Vass, 2010; Bandura, 1999; Durkheim, 2001).



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Empowerment

Empowerment...

- Is the expansion of agency (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007)
 - The extent to which some categories of people are able to control their own destinies, even when those interests are opposed by those of the other people whom they interact

(Mason and Smith, 2003 p.1)

Agency and Empowerment: the close link

- Alsop et al. (2006) suggests two components to empowerment:
 1. The ability to act on behalf of what you value and have reason to value (agency)
 2. Institutional environment which may or may not offer opportunity to exert agency

Empowerment:

- Empowerment is a term that has gained prominence in both developing and peacebuilding contexts.
- Originally, it was a radical concept challenging existing patterns of domination and advocating for the liberation of marginalised groups.
- However, over time, it has become a more technical concept associated with capacity building.
- In the peacebuilding policy arena, it contrasts with the term 'local ownership'.
- Empowerment is part of a global discourse that includes terms like participation, bottom-up practices, and partnership.
- Despite its widespread use, there are diverse interpretations of what empowerment truly means and how it should be promoted.

Empowerment:

- Empowerment refers to the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you.
- It involves the ability to act independently, make choices, and exert free will.

Empowerment: Individual Autonomy

- Empowerment enables individuals to become stronger and more confident
- It allows them to take control of their own lives and assert their rights.
- Individual Autonomy refers to the capacity of individuals to make independent decisions and act freely, without undue influence or coercion from external forces such as social norms, institutions, or other individuals.
- It is a key concept in understanding the dynamics of power and agency within society.

Empowerment: Individual Autonomy

- Individual autonomy encompasses the ability to choose one's own values, beliefs, and goals, and to pursue them without interference.
- It is often examined in relation to broader social structures and cultural contexts that may either support or constrain individual autonomy.

Empowerment: Community Empowerment

- Beyond individual empowerment, it extends to communities
- Communities gain the ability to represent their interests responsibly and self-determinedly
- It is a process by which individuals within a community gain control over their lives, resources, and decisions that affect them.
- This can include grassroots organising, participatory decision-making, and collective action to address social, economic, and political issues within the community.

Empowerment:

Community Empowerment

- For Example:
 - A community organising a campaign to advocate for better housing conditions or improved access to education and healthcare services.



(Dietz and Burns, 1992)

Empowerment: Rights and Authority

- Empowerment involves granting rights, authority, and the power to make decisions.
- Whether in personal life or societal contexts, it's about claiming agency and autonomy.

Empowerment: Rights and Authority

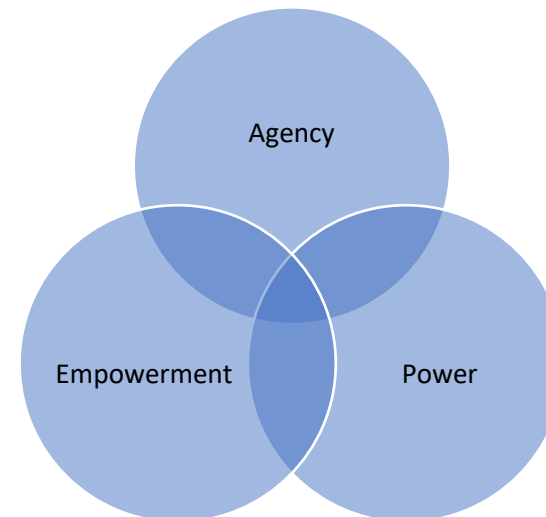
- Rights:
 - Rights refer to the legal, social, or ethical entitlements that individuals or groups possess.
 - Empowerment often involves the recognition and assertion of these rights, such as the right to education, healthcare, political participation, or fair treatment.
 - Empowerment initiatives may focus on ensuring that marginalised or disadvantaged groups have access to their rights and can exercise them effectively.
 - This can involve legal advocacy, policy reforms, or grassroots organising to promote awareness and enforcement of rights.

Empowerment: Rights and Authority

- Authority:
 - Authority pertains to the legitimate power that individuals or institutions possess to make decisions, enforce rules, or influence behaviour within a social context.
 - The sociological view of empowerment focusses on the distribution and exercise of authority are critical considerations.
 - Empowerment efforts may aim to decentralise decision-making processes, and challenge hierarchical power dynamics that perpetuate inequalities.
 - This can involve promoting participatory governance models, community-led initiatives, and mechanisms for accountability and transparency in decision-making.

Empowerment: Rights and Authority

- Summary:
 - Overall, rights and authority are interconnected aspects of empowerment as they shape individuals' ability to exercise agency, challenge oppression, and participate in processes that affect their lives and communities.





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Advocating for change

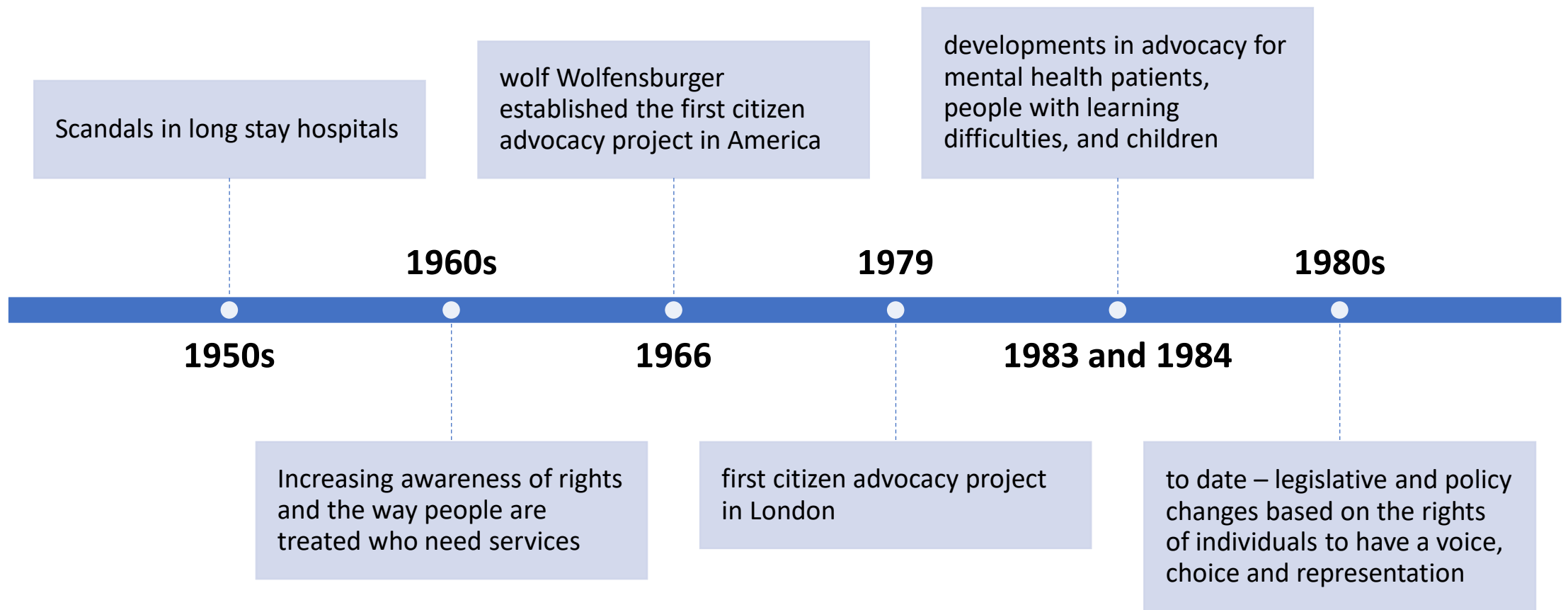
Definition:

- “Advocacy is taking action to help people say what they want, secure their rights, represent their interests and obtain the services they need. Advocates and advocacy schemes work in partnership with the people they support and take their side. Advocacy promotes social inclusion, equality and social justice.”

Definition:

- “Advocacy supports and enables people who have difficulty representing their interests, to exercise their rights, express their views, explore and make informed choices. Independent advocacy supports the person regardless of the demands and concerns of others. It challenges the causes and effects of injustice, oppression and abuse and upholds human rights.

History of Advocacy



Barriers

- There are many barriers that prevent people from having agency and being empowered.
- Social barriers refer to differences and inequalities associated with different types of people in society.
- Barriers can occur because of people's genders, ethnicities, races, religions, or socioeconomic status.

Potential Barriers To Rights

- Unable to Participate
- Not knowing what their rights are
- Not understanding how they apply to the individual
- Not having the right information, not being able to access it
- Not having support to understand how rights apply to someone
- Not being able to challenge them or frightened to challenge
- Unable to stand up for oneself
- Feeling alone and not having the confidence to speak up
- Living in fear of others
- Not wanting to make a fuss
- Lack of capacity
- Services not understanding



Group Task

- Considering the barriers described within the last slide:
 - Discuss scenarios in which you may find these barriers within society
 - Think about who in society could be impacted by these barriers

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