

This essay will define advocacy, what exactly an advocate's role is and how this relates to power, oppression and agency looking at disadvantaged people in the UK. This will be explored in relation to equality and empowerment looking at the bedroom tax and how it affected disadvantaged people.

Neil Batemans definition of advocacy is: "A device to influence the balance of the needs/rights of the group in the favour of the needs/rights of individuals, especially those on the social margins" (Bateman, 2000). This gives the impression that an advocate is a tool with many skills, these can include a person-centred approach, being accessible, being able to empower and safeguard an individual and of course, balance the needs/rights of an individual, all of which work towards achieving the same goal, equality. John Baker et al. describes equality as: "All human beings have equal worth and importance and are therefore equally worthy of concern and respect" (Baker, et al., 2004). This inescapably gives the value of people; we are all human beings, we are all important, no matter what background we come from so therefore we should all be entitled to equality. With equality being the end goal, there are many steps in which an advocate must take to achieve the best outcome for the individual and to overcome the barriers that the individual may have. A common barrier that individuals may have is not knowing their rights or not having the right information or equally not being able to understand the information. This means that an individual is in a disadvantaged position and the role of an advocate is to inform them of their rights, explain it to them in a way that they will understand and then empower them to stand up for their rights. An advocate should be a support system which provides representation and empowerment and should be biased to the client, the older people's advocacy alliance gives an exemplary example of advocacy:

In short it's very simple, it means providing a voice for the voiceless, supporting them to make choices about things that matter in their lives, helping them to regain control when life deals them a crippling blow, and supporting them to make decisions about the help and support they need to maintain independence and lead full and rewarding lives (OPAAL, n.d.).

This simple explanation clarifies what an advocate's role is but also who an advocate should be, an advocate should have positive characteristics including a calm, thoughtful and sensitive disposition, being appropriate and fair and good at building relationships, as the main need for an advocate comes from disadvantaged people, who are already feeling vulnerable and put down by society. The end goal for an advocate is to empower the person they are advocating

for because ultimately people are entitled to be in control of their own lives and to exercise choice which they believe is in their best interests.

Underpinning advocacy are three principles, power, oppression and agency. Power can have many different meanings, but when put into the advocacy context both a negative and a positive can be observed. Vaneklassen and miller (2007) talk about expressions of power, when looked at in context, a disadvantaged person does not have the 'power to' achieve what they want to achieve, does not have the 'power within' due to self-confidence or self-awareness, they do not usually have the 'power with' others as part of the disadvantage could be that they have no one to turn to, and they do not have the 'power over' because it is the individuals voice that it not being heard; they are being controlled by society (Vaneklasses & Miller, 2007). An advocate's role is to turn all these forms of power into positives by empowering the individual, to give them the power to have their own voice and to enable 'conscientizacao'. "The term conscientizacao refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 2017). This means that the advocate is giving the individual the power to fight against the oppression that they are in and to take control of their lives; their reality. This quote provides another outlook on power; political power.

Politics is the exercise of power, and the interaction of people with power, when defined narrowly, it refers to the governing of a country or state and is limited to professional politicians. However, when defined broadly, it can refer to the interaction of all forms of power between people (Watson, 2014, p. 33).

Power in the political sense is the most recognisable form of power, as society is dictated by policies, legislation and laws. Considering the bedroom tax for example, on the 1st of April 2013 the Government updated a policy under the Welfare Reform Act 2012 to include reducing the housing benefit of people who were of working age and had spare bedrooms within social housing. However, the Government did not consider tenants who were already at a disadvantage, people with disability for example, who even though they were of working age were unable to work and therefore claimed housing benefit and required a 'spare room' because sharing a room with their partner could have been detrimental to health or the room may have been needed for overnight carers. The Guardian reports:

An academic study found that the bedroom tax had a range of negative health impacts on many of those who were subjected to it, including stress, anxiety, hunger, ill health and depression (Guardian, 2016).

This shows that the disadvantaged of the bedroom tax was recognised, and society was using advocacy to have their voice heard and their concerns considered. “Advocacy interacts with power because it involves: Holding decision-makers to account for their use of power” (Watson, 2014, p. 30). In this instance the decision-makers are the Government, and society used all their power to make it known how detrimental this policy was to those who were disadvantaged.

This also shows how power and oppression are linked and suggests that without power there would not be oppression. Neil Thomson describes oppression as “inhumane or degrading treatment of individuals or groups; hardship and injustice brought about by dominance of one group over another; the negative and demeaning exercise of power” (Thompson, 2016, p. 50). By using the same example of the bedroom tax, Shelter England (2013) suggested that “hard - pressed families on the lowest level of income would need to find an average of £14 per week out of an already over stretched budget” (Webb, 2013) This can show how people in social housing are already put into the ‘disadvantaged’ group in receipt of degrading treatment from the Government; oppression. The Guardian reported on how the bedroom tax effected people: “The evaluation found that three-quarters of those affected by the bedroom tax said they have had to cut back on food, 46% said they had cut back on heating and 33% on travel” (Guardian, 2016). These three things are considered essential for people’s wellbeing and are also basic human needs/rights. Neil Thompson also states that:

Certain actions, attitudes and structures have the effect of oppressing particular individuals and groups – specifically those ‘out groups’ that are discriminated against within the social structure (subaltern groups, to use the technical term).

Often oppression is unintended on the part of individuals, but none the less deeply ingrained in cultural patterns and institutional structures. Unfair discrimination is the primary source of oppression (Thompson, 2016, p. 196).

This defines oppression in a way that can be understand, how being in a disadvantaged position and being discriminated against can cause oppression within society. Many oppressed people have no self-belief which is a barrier that an advocate can help the individual overcome, it can start to open the mind of the individual and enable them to see their true feelings for a situation. Once the individual is aware that they are oppressed, they then have an awareness of the need for agency and are empowered to turn it into action. Sen (1999) talks about how empowerment can give agency: “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). This means that by empowering an individual to have agency, it is giving the individual the

opportunity to have greater freedom and to self-advocate effectively. Having agency is knocking down the barriers that the individual initially had and giving them the confidence to use their voice.

An advocate has the skills to balance the two components, agency and empowerment. Connecting advocacy and Agency, Ling and Dale (2013) wrote “The ability to affect events outside one’s immediate sphere of influence” (Ling & Dale, 2013). This means that an advocate’s role is giving someone the ability to speak up about a problem that they are not comfortable with by empowering them; giving them power when they are powerless, Paul Spicker’s definition of empowerment clarifies this:

A process whereby the social worker or other helping professional engages in a set of activities with the client aimed at reducing the powerlessness stemming from the experience of discrimination because the client belongs to a stigmatised collective (Spicker, 2008).

In conclusion, an advocates role is a simple yet effective one, ultimately to achieve equality, whether you are disadvantaged in the first place or not, we are all people, wanting the best from the world that we have around us, we may have different social class, educational backgrounds and different starts in life, but by empowerment we can all be equal. An advocate provides a voice for an individual, standing by their side and by looking at the three principles, power, oppression and agency an advocate can provide a vital service to the disadvantaged, to empower them to have the power the overcome oppression using agency.

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