



ECAY6003: Advocacy: Maintaining Independence in Service Provision

Theme 5: Principles of Empowerment (Revisited)

Part 1: Power, Empowerment Theory, Social Justice. Social Control and Oppression



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Principles of Empowerment

Advocates working with those 'without power'



Module ECAY6003



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People without 'power'

The UK Government in 2004 defined social exclusion as;

- 'what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'
(UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004, p.19).
- Such people can also be considered as 'disempowered' or 'disenfranchised' by their position in society

Theme outline

- What is Power?
- What is your understanding of Empowerment?
- Empowerment in context.
- Empowerment theory.
- Principles of Empowerment.
- Empowerment and change.
- Empowerment in Practice.

What is power?

- Neil Thompson in his book *Power and Empowerment* (2007, p. 4).) suggests that power is a term that is widely used but nonetheless very hard to pin down
- He goes on to argue that we will need to settle for a broader understanding of the term that takes account of different theoretical orientations towards it.
- Scott (2015) makes the same point in his exploration of the [sociological uses of the phrase](#)

What is Power?

Watch the following video from Eric Liu (2014).

As you watch the video, make a note of any key words or phrases that he uses when talking about power in society.

Then share these with the group.



What is power?

- In a previous Theme we explored the ideas of Julia Middleton (2007) these different forms of power:
- Of position – comes with the position one holds
- Of personality – comes from your ‘strength of character’
- Of ideas – comes from the quality of your ideas and creativity
- Of intellect – comes from ability to grasp facts and critical thinking
- To communicate – comes from your ability to get across your message
- To Connect – comes from having an effective network that you can draw on and expand
- To Invest – comes from having a budget or resources to use
- To Reward – comes from the ability to reward people financially or through recognition

Which of these types of power do the socially excluded have?



Foucault on Power

- Michel Foucault is a key, post-modernist, theorist and considered how power is used on an everyday basis.
- He suggests that there is a network of practices and institutions in society which effectively controls people and which people 'allow' to control them
- Examples of this would be surveillance, CCTV, data gathering etc.
- Because of this 'obedience' governments do not need to assert their power in an explicit way (e.g. arrest, coercion etc.).

Foucault on Power

- Elsewhere, Foucault has argued that ‘power relations’ are everywhere and include ‘the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live’
- He argues that the struggles of disempowered people (i.e. on the negative side of these power relations) are both ‘transversal’ in that they exist in every society and that they are struggles against the uncontrolled ‘power effects’ or the negative effects of such power relations

What does Empowerment mean to you?



- Others have given the following answers;
 - Gaining more control over your own life?
 - Being aware of and using your personal resources?
 - Overcoming obstacles to meet your needs and aspirations?
 - Having your voice heard in decision making?
 - Being able to challenge inequality and oppression in your life?

See for example (Dalrymple and Burke, 2001: p. 49)

What does Empowerment mean to others?

Watch the following video from the Glasgow Disability Alliance [GDA] (2017).

As you watch the video, make a note of any key words or phrases that the members of the GDA use when talking about empowerment.

Then share these with the group.



Professional Approaches to Empowerment

- The notion of Empowering Practice is based on the idea that people are deficient or lacking in some form of social capital.
- This means that they lack the 'power' to easily change things for themselves
- In fields such as Social Work this has led to the development of Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory

- ‘Empowerment theory [...] involves using intervention methods to guide people toward achieving a sense of control’.
- ‘People may feel helpless in their lives for any number of reasons, but empowerment theory focuses on how oppression contributes to this experience’.
- ‘It centers on helping marginalized people at individual, group and community levels gain the personal, interpersonal and political power to improve their lives’.

Empowerment Theory

We will now take some time to look at related concepts and theories that feed into Empowerment Theory



Social Justice

- Social Justice has been described as the idea that society should be ‘more inclusive, equitable, healthy, and just’

(Muschert & Budd, 2020, p. xi)

- This message is repeated in the field of public policy when Public Health Network Cymru (part of the NHS) state that;
- ‘Wales is made up of many communities and social justice mean(s) the rights of all people in Wales are considered in a fair and equitable way.’, and that
- ‘Social justice specifically focuses on those population groups who are most disadvantaged in our society’.

(Public Health Network Cymru, 2024)



Social Control

- A functionalist perspective on social control is that 'social control is of value to society as a whole, since it is essential to the maintenance of social order' (Scott, 2015, no page)
- As such the norms of a society evolve 'naturally' in order to allow society to function effectively.
- Conflict and post-modern theorists, for example Michel Foucault, take a different view
- They see social control being utilised by those 'in power' to maintain their own interests
- Foucault (1982, p,781) argues that the individual in society is 'subject to someone else by control and dependence'

Social Control

- Foucault's criticism of the use of social control is mirrored by the Criminologist Stanly Cohen (1985) who argues that the policies of social control in a state are developed in order to maintain the power and the interested of experts and professionals.
- When one speaks of social control it is important to note that the concept is usually seen as having two distinct forms
- The first is often called repressive or coercive social control (hard control).
- The second involves ideological control (soft control) through information, propaganda etc.
- We will look at each in turn briefly.

‘Hard’ Social Control

- Repressive or coercive control includes physical constraint and punishment, the police and military, the criminal justice system etc.
- It is used to maintain social order, however its misuse can lead to disempowerment on a serious scale
- For example, [China’s re-education camps for Uyghurs](#)
- [Russia’s anti-homosexual legislation](#)
- Iran’s ‘[morality police](#)’
- Whilst it can be argued that these are extreme examples of ‘hard’ social control the use of such techniques exists, to a greater or lesser extent in every country



'Hard' Social Control

- Indeed, within the UK the amount and type of 'hard' social control is often in the news for example;
- [Legislative scrutiny highlights human rights failings of Rwanda Bill](#)
- [Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988](#)
- [New protest laws on face coverings and pyrotechnics](#)



‘Soft’ Social Control

- This is often more difficult to recognise as it is a more subtle form of control
- Scott (2015, no page) talks of this form of control as operating by the ‘shaping of ideas, values and attitudes’
- Agents of ‘soft’ social control can include traditional ‘mass’ media, social media
- It can also be argued that religion is a form of ‘soft’ social control
- For example, Orrante (2008, p. 41) states that ‘Religion produces social control by promoting the notion that religious beliefs and affiliation bring out the good in people.’



‘Soft’ Social Control

- Two other aspects of ‘soft’ social control that can be exercised by governments as well as other organisations are ‘propaganda’ and ‘Nudge theory’
- In terms of propaganda, Pedro-Carañana, Broudy & Klaehn (2018, p21) argue that ‘ People with wealth and political and social power want to protect and expand their interests, and this requires command over the means of communication..’
- They go on to argue that ‘The growth of inequality enlarges the need and ability to dominate the flow of information.
- This goes to the heart of the debate over the difference between ‘public information’ and ‘propaganda’



'Soft' Social Control

- Nudge theory has been described by Schmidt and Engelen (2020, no page) as policies that 'try to improve people's decisions by changing the ways options are presented to them, rather than changing the options themselves or incentivizing or coercing people'.
- They go on to state that 'Nudging has been met with great enthusiasm but also fierce criticism' (ibid).
- An example would be the 'opt out' system for organ donation rather than having people 'opt in' as happened previously
- They agree that this works by 'by relying on people's predictable tendencies to stick to the status quo' (ibid).



‘Soft’ Social Control

- As defined by Schmidt and Engelen (2020, no page), the concerns regarding nudge theory are based on worries about the following;
- In terms of autonomy, there is a worry that ‘when we are nudged, we are no longer the “authors” of our choices’ (ibid)
- There is also a concern that, in a diverse society, what might be ‘good’ for one group may not be ‘good’ for another, and which decides what is ‘good’ anyway?
- There is also concern that nudging is done with people knowing it, that is happens ‘behind their backs’ (ibid)
- A final concern is that nudging could be used merely to promote the interests of the ‘powerholders’ (ibid)



Oppression

- This concept has strong links to the idea of social control (both coercive and ideological) that we have looked at earlier
- The National Museum of African American History & Culture (No Date) state that 'Systems of oppression are individual, institutional, and societal and their effects on people have a long history...'
- A person of [a] non-dominant group can experience oppression in the form of limitations, disadvantages, or disapproval. They may even suffer abuse from individuals, institutions, or cultural practices.
- "Oppression" refers to a combination of prejudice and institutional power that creates a system that regularly and severely discriminates against some groups and benefits other groups.



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