Theorising Empowerment Practice from the Pacific and Indigenous Australia

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Statement of originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own original work. This thesis has not been submitted elsewhere for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signed:
Abstract

Since the 1970s, the concept of empowerment has been widely adopted in a range of fields from international development to education, and management to public health. This diversity has enriched the literature on empowerment, but has also contributed to a lack of precision in the way empowerment is defined and employed. In the field of community psychology, empowerment is taken as the matter of central interest, assuming individual, organisational and social dimensions, as it is oriented towards people taking collective action to improve their circumstances by rectifying disparities in power and control. Accepting the view that empowerment necessarily incorporates these three dimensions of persons, groups and their interaction with society, this thesis asks whether there are universally applicable ways that organisations can intervene to support people to assume greater autonomy and control over their circumstances.

This thesis is empirically grounded in four organisations and their social intervention practices. Three of these organisations are in the Pacific (Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Fiji) and one is in Aboriginal Australia. Across this variety of historical, social and cultural settings, these groups show conceptual similarities in their operations and outreach methodologies. The case-study organisations share a philosophy that is framed positively in terms of control by people of their social development, and negatively as constrained by the effect of structures of colonising power relations. They have in common the aim of producing personal, group and social change that is transformative. Interrogating these similarities, the thesis explores the diverse literature on empowerment to develop a three-dimensional model of the empowering group called ‘the field of community control’.

As a foundation for this model, the thesis advances a universalist view of human need based on the classes of security, identity and autonomy. It then employs Habermas’s concepts of dramaturgical, normative and teleological action to incorporate into the model a dynamic view of the group as the locus of control for personal and social change. Finally, the thesis draws on social action studies from the United States to develop the concept of social empowerment as agency. The model shows these individual, group and social dimensions in dynamic relation, and provides a framework for interpreting the change processes, indicators and outcomes of empowerment in each dimension. The thesis reveals that empowerment occurs in the transformative domains of risk and trust, critical consciousness and structural innovation, these being the public goods that groups must produce to mobilise personal and collective power.
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