October 2012

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Theoretical and Applied Perspectives on Power: Recognizing Processes That Undermine Effective Community-University Partnerships

Lorilee R. Sandmann and Brandon W. Kliewer

Abstract

Interrelational power dynamics are intimately connected to the success of any relationship and are especially critical in developing and sustaining mutually beneficial, reciprocally engaged partnerships. This work analyzes how elements of power impact the negotiation of engagement in community-university partnerships. Although this piece is a general theoretical account of power, it indicates very specific implications for community partners. A hypothetical example is used to contextualize distinct power challenges that confront community partners and faculty members during the engagement process. Specific attention is given to how organizational structure, the academic calendar, and the creation of knowledge influence produced understandings of differentials in power and differentials in need. The paper concludes with a discussion of three applied strategies that can be used to neutralize differentials in power and recognize differentials in need associated with the development of community-university partnerships. The theoretical language of differentials in power and differentials in need will arm practitioners with analytical tools to shape more meaningful partnerships.

Introduction

Relationships require nuanced and clearly orchestrated negotiations of power. The success of any relationship, regardless of type, is often tied to how interested parties negotiate expectations and obligations. Community-university partnerships are no different. Negotiating reciprocity and mutuality and maintaining a sustained relationship are fraught with power differentials. Most of the literature that investigates and theorizes power dynamics of community-university partnerships adopts the perspective of the university. However, there has recently been an effort to articulate a community voice in community engagement research (Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2010; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker, Tryon, & Hilgendorf, 2009). Despite this budding stream of literature, the theoretical basis of this research generally remains underdeveloped. Partners, often representing divergent orientations, strive to define their collaboration in terms of common interests and goals. However, partnerships exist within social and political contexts that produce differentials in power and inform differentials in need. If the practice of community engagement is to approach normative goals of reciprocity and mutuality, social and political structures that produce relative differentials in power and need must be recognized from multiple theoretical perspectives. This article analyzes how differentials in power and differentials in need impact the negotiation of engagement in community-university partnerships. Essentially, it confronts this question: How do differentials in power and differentials in need impact the negotiation of reciprocity and mutuality in the context of maintaining a meaningful "engaged" community-university relationship?

In order to work through the theoretical and applied elements of power, this paper is divided into three sections. The first section presents a hypothetical example, describing an engagement situation from the perspective of a community partner. The scenario situates the theoretical power dynamics that community partners must work through in order to initiate and maintain an engaged relationship. To construct a typical composite example, we have drawn the scenario from the systematic observation and study of community-university partnerships associated with a major engagement initiative of The University of Georgia. The second section relies on the hypothetical example to analyze how differentials in power and need influence the engaged relationship from the standpoint of community. The section considers aspects related to the organization of the university, the academic calendar, and the negotiation of knowledge production. The third section provides three applied strategies for managing differentials in power and need. The authors of this article, it should be noted, have not played the role of community partner. Rather our data and analysis come from rigorous study of both theories of

power and community-university partnerships (Sandmann, Kliewer, Kim, & Omerikwa, 2010; Sandmann, Moore, & Quinn, 2012).

Hypothetical Example: Poliz City and a Concerned Community Partner

Times are tough. The once-vibrant urban center of Poliz City has now withered to an unhealthy standstill. As industries shut down and relocate in the wake of the global financial crisis and subsequent economic slowdown, many local businesses and shops of the downtown area have closed, leading to urban blight and a significantly reduced tax base. The reduced tax revenue can no longer support the current level of public services (trash removal, sewage-related maintenance, public space maintenance, public employee pensions, etc.). In accordance with neoliberal theory and in the general interest of cost saving, essential social services have been cut from the city, local, and state budgets.

Cathy, a concerned citizen, knew that if nothing were done the situation would continue to spiral downward. Cathy and a small group of other citizens saw urban blight as the key problem that was stalling Poliz City's economic and social recovery. However, Cathy lacked appropriate empirical and scientific knowledge to support her policy recommendations, as well as the "legitimated" and "empirical" language that is valued by most government, nongovernmental, and business organizations. She hoped that researchers and experts from the university could assist the community in contextualizing specific community issues in a manner that would support her policy approaches and lend credibility to multiple community groups attempting to address issues impacting the urban area.

Historically, the university and various elements within the community understood their objectives as being independent from each other. Cathy, and the community group that she represented, wanted to initiate a problem-based, hopefully long-term relationship with the university. However, after a few weeks of exploring potential connections with the university, Cathy still had no inroads into the university administrative structure. As a result, with the permission of the other key community partners, Cathy decided to work directly with a university partner. In doing so, she encountered three particular challenges. First, it was difficult to maneuver through the organizational structure of the university and make initial contact. Second, the academic calendar of the university did not mesh well with the community's projected project timeline. Third, it was difficult for Cathy and the eventual university partner, Professor Robert, to agree on the type of knowledge to be produced from the partnership. Each of these not-unique challenges is discussed from the perspective of community and in terms of the potential tensions that can result from differentials in power and differentials in need. Overcoming tensions epitomized by these three examples represents an important step in producing a theoretical conception of power that supports meaningful community-university partnerships.

Organizational Structures and Initial Engagement

Community-engaged scholarship ideally involves equitable partnerships characterized by mutuality and reciprocity (Boyer, 1990, 1996). Although these concepts are essential to community engagement praxis, research on community-university collaborations shows a wide range of differentiation (Driscoll, 2008; Enos & Morton, 2003; Sockett, 1998). The inability of community engagement practice to achieve these ideal standards can be tied to seen and unseen social and political structures, which not only produce relative differentials in power, but also contextualize the community engagement experience. In many instances, as in Cathy's situation, the university is well structured, hierarchical yet decentralized, with its own procedural framework and infrastructure. The community represented by Cathy, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of hierarchy and structure. One of the first obstacles Cathy had to overcome was entering and "engaging" with the university. Cathy did not know whom to contact to initiate such a relationship at the local university. Adding to the uncertainty, she had no specific project ideas that might help target a contact. She saw the potential to develop a variety of projects using both community and university resources, but this only expanded the number of potential entry points.

The lack of a clear entry point for Cathy to engage the university made it very difficult to initiate the process under terms of equality. Entering a highly organized, hierarchical, and formalized institution introduces degrees of power that shade any potential partnership. The community partner has to submit to a series of institutional structures and norms, but has no way of fully knowing what expectations are implicit when initiating contact with a university. In

Cathy's case the initial engagement not only was unnerving but produced differentials in power that threatened the partnership from the start. Our point is not to imply that initial engagement is always problematic. We do, however, wish to highlight how the structural organization of an institution can produce forms of power that undermine the viability of engaged partnerships.

Although university organizational structure posed a significant problem for Cathy in this case, differentials in power do not necessarily favor the university partner. Power differentials always occur in community-university relationships, but the community can sometimes be the more powerful partner (Van de Ven, 2007). This theoretical perspective applies equally to universities attempting to initiate a relationship with communities. Thus, just as negotiating the hierarchical yet decentralized structure of academia can be a daunting task for a community partner, organizational power within a community may also prove an obstacle for a university partner. However, discussions of the social, political, and anthropological dynamics of community power exceed the purview of this paper.

Cathy had to enter the imposing organization of the university to initiate the partnership. In this setting, values, internal structures, and bureaucratic patterns determine behavioral norms and influence performative actions. Entering the university structure and trying to learn and recognize these expectations without coaching or sponsorship placed Cathy at a power relationship disadvantage. The ways in which performative expectations can impact community engagement have been recognized in the literature (Miller, 1997; Moje, 2000; Smith, 1994). This dynamic can be particularly insidious for members of marginalized groups that lack certain performative behaviors and levels of social capital.

In a relationship characterized by mutuality, all entities are interdependent, all participate in the relationship, and all benefit in a commensurate manner (Still & Good, 1992). The differentials in power between the engaged scholar-researcher and the community partner affect the level of mutuality and reciprocity in the processes, purpose, and outcome of the collaboration (Stanton, 2007). However, a theoretical conception of power can enable partners to recognize sources of power differentials as elements that can enhance or undermine reciprocity. In practice, this could mean that individuals are able to recognize how contextual aspects of their organization influence and inform the partnership. For example, members of the professoriate are typically organized by academic disciplines and drawn to have a cosmopolitan perspective (Rhoades, 2009). Thus, the framework of the university might not be conducive to maintaining the types of partnerships that community partners' desire. Understanding the basis for why community and universities have different orientations can help identify the origins of differentials in power.

Timing and the Academic Calendar

Cathy was confronted with a second challenge once she navigated the differentials in power tied to maneuvering through the university structure. Professor Robert, the faculty member she eventually partnered with, would not be able to start the project until the spring semester, at that point six months away. In our hypothetical example, Cathy and the community wanted to start the engagement project immediately. However, Professor Robert could not accommodate this desire because his time was limited by work requirements for the academic semester. This is a case of differences in need challenging the effectiveness of a partnership in a context of power.

Differing time orientations often create tensions and lead to unstable partnerships. Community members may perceive a need to address their issues quickly, although doing so would necessitate taking action based on limited information. In contrast, academic norms and standards encourage faculty members to develop carefully designed courses and research projects. Such norms make higher education institutions significantly less dynamic than some community organizations. However, the need to follow carefully designed curricula and apply academic rigor in executing research moves institutions of higher education toward having longer timelines preceding a project. The time frame of semesters or quarters also places unavoidable time limitations on collaborations that involve students, such as service-learning projects. Timing can be thought of as creating a difference in need at the institution-to-institution level that cannot be solved through individual power negotiations. Moreover, the nature of the issue being addressed in the hypothetical example, Poliz City's economic recovery, is likewise a structural and institutionalized issue not amenable to immediate resolution, regardless of how urgent it seems to community members.

Even when the intentions of both parties

are genuinely committed to collaboration (Stanton, 2007), the university's schedule and timing often constrain community actions. By necessity, universities operate on prescribed schedules and academic calendars. Partnerships can extend beyond the semester, but the end of each academic term represents an artificial stopping point that interrupts engagement projects. For the community, these interruptions, although brief, may be perceived as a threat to a partnership and remind partners of the differential in need. Higher education institutions commonly measure time in semesters or other academic periods, and community engagement projects are often made to fit within the academic calendar. For the community partner, however, the need to accommodate the university-based time frame can undermine the partnership. In the hypothetical example, negotiating the timeline of the partnership was a significant point of tension Cathy confronted.

Negotiating Knowledge

Understanding the negotiation of knowledge from the community perspective requires an appreciation of the relationship between higher education and knowledge. Within the past 30 years, fundamental assumptions underlying the relationship between the economy, the state, and the university have changed. It was once accepted that the state and the capitalist economy were structured to allow for compromise between the social needs of citizens and the outcomes produced by the market. Guided by Keynesian economic policies, the "welfare state" mediated between principles of social well being and principles of the capitalist system. Within this framework, the knowledge created within the university was seen to promote a "public good" and was removed from private industry. Essentially, the Keynesian welfare state supported a "public or common good" that provided a baseline protection and social/political space that was free from the market rationality of the capitalist system (Harvey, 2005; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

However, at some point the guiding theoretical impetus that grounded the welfare state was undermined by an emergent acceptance and application of neoliberal economic and social policies. Privatization, deregulation, re-regulation, and a general deconstruction of the Keynesian welfare state became the model. "The financialization of everything," according to David Harvey (2005), highlighted the emergence of neoliberalism as a hegemonic force that reshaped existing social, political, and economic institutions. This neoliberal movement also impacts a variety of elements of higher education.

Market principles have begun to influence the general operation and administrative organization of universities, which now "commodify" research, teaching, and even service to fit within the logics of neoliberalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Basic inquiry-based research that promoted a broad conception of the public good started receiving less financial support compared to research with potential commercial value. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) tracked how academic capitalism influences all levels and elements of the university. Further research suggests that entrepreneurial pursuits within higher education have become the norm globally (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), so that the very notion of knowledge and its relationship to the "public good" has become commodified. The distinction between the state, the university, and industry has been blurred and in many ways has been completely eliminated. Academic capitalism, as conceptualized by Slaughter and Rhoades and Slaughter and Leslie, has become so pervasive that it must be assumed, or at least recognized, when negotiating the outcomes of community-university partnerships. In order for the community partner to successfully negotiate types of knowledge that community-university collaboration may produce, it is important to account for the way academic capitalism informs the policy environment of the university and contributes to institutional pressures that might be influencing university representatives.

As a result of the general move toward commodification of knowledge, Cathy was required to define the type of research to be performed within the partnership in this context. Community stakeholders were applying pressure on her to produce research and data directly applicable to problems in the community. At the same time, the forces of academic capitalism were applying pressure on Professor Robert to produce a research article or scholarly product appreciated within the academic capitalism paradigm. Cathy's need for applied problem-based knowledge put her in direct conflict with her individual university partner; that is, differentials in power and differentials in need coalesced to create a tension within the partnership.

Cathy had confronted the initial problem of engagement, involving differentials in power, and

then a differential in need tied to the academic calendar. This third challenge involves differentials in both power and need. The negotiation of different structures and power assigned to different forms of knowledge was even more difficult for Cathy because she had no idea of the larger policy context that informed the basis of academic capitalism. The precedence of commodified research over applied and problem-based research has evolved through time and is not intuitive. From the perspective of the community, commodified and technical research creates an access point that often excludes non-academics.

Whatever the complexities of the relationship between the community and the university, the most important goal of the community is the fulfillment of social needs (Todd, Ebata, & Hughes, 1998; Wuthnow, 1999). Ideally, the university endeavors to adhere to the standards of engaged research as suggested by Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997), including (a) having clear goals for the partnership; (b) making adequate preparation for the research, including strategies of relationship building; (c) the use of appropriate research methods; (d) having significant results; (e) effectively presenting or disseminating results; and (f) reflecting on the process. However, these multifold concerns may conflict with the community interest. For example, the generalizable results that academic capitalism demands may not satisfy community stakeholders' desire for a more specific utilitarian solution. Tensions between community and university preference can be reconciled by overlapping theoretical conceptions of power. By overlaying conceptions of power upon community-university partnerships, we begin to understand how both conscious and unconscious structures and expectations need to be recognized in order to achieve meaningful partnerships based upon commitments to equality.

In practice, this might mean that Cathy can recognize differentials in need that inform differentials in power within the negotiation process by articulating the competing objectives from her perspective, thus directing attention toward specific points of disagreement. A focus on these points avoids counterproductive negotiations centered on the general disagreement of the partnership. For example, both Cathy and Robert have an interest in making the project beneficial for all interested parties. Both agree that data produced from an empirical study would be beneficial in addressing community issues. In this case the general disagreement lies in the type

of knowledge to be produced. The point that triggered the disagreement and allowed power dynamics to impact the negotiation process was the desire for a given outcome: applied knowledge in Cathy's case and commodifiable knowledge in Professor Robert's. By focusing on this issue, the two can negotiate acceptable terms of reciprocity and highlight differentials in need. This approach recognizes differentials of power produced in a policy context that assign privilege to certain forms of research.

The goal of any negotiation process is to manage power dynamics and recognize differentials in need throughout the process. Negotiations at the individual-to-individual level that focus on the trigger point of disagreement can create a space where power dynamics remain static and the interested parties can resolve points of contestation without affirming differentials in power.

Further in practice, this approach can take multiple forms. Cathy could ask the following question: How can we ensure that applied research is rigorous and attempts to produce new knowledge? This approach focuses the negotiation process on the trigger point of divergence. Furthermore, this approach empowers the community partner to maintain the terms of the partnership by highlighting aspects of differentials in power and differentials in need.

The point of this discussion is not to create an indictment of academic capitalism but to demonstrate how community partners need to consider larger social, political, and economic factors when negotiating terms of reciprocity. Community members interested in negotiating reciprocity should ask university representatives about institutional pressures and work through probing conversations that negotiate the criteria of the relationship. Once institutional pressures that inform differentials in need are identified, community partners can begin to use a shared language that moves toward more robust understandings of reciprocity.

Practical Implications

For a community partner, challenges tied to negotiating the terms of effective community-university engagement occur throughout the engagement process. Community partners can better understand sources of conflict by recognizing differentials in power and differentials in need. Generally, community members and university administrators ought to establish

parameters of communication that recognize how seen and unseen structures can produce differentials in power and need. Partnerships are more likely to be successful if the terms of the relationship are transparent and are the product of a clearly outlined communication process. Structured communication ensures that a partner does not intentionally or unintentionally exploit differentials in power and that partners recognize differentials in need. Next, we present three applied approaches that can highlight how issues of power and need can be managed to support effective communication in community engagement partnerships.

Contractual Obligations

A formal memorandum of agreement or a legal contract can serve as an effective basis of communication that recognizes differentials in power and need. Contractual agreements can define the obligations and expectations of each partner in the engaged relationship. Essentially, the contractual model creates a context that formalizes the communication between the community and university. This type of quasi-legal approach forces both parties to discuss the components of the relationship in very specific terms.

A major strength of the contractual approach is that it forces university-community partners to make tough decisions about the relationship up front. In most situations engaged relationships respond to conflict when it develops. The contractual approach opens lines of communication and might help prevent serious disputes from developing. Furthermore, the contractual process transfers both conscious and unconscious power differentials to a conceivably objective juridical space. Instead of confronting differentials in power on a case-by-case basis, contractual understandings of partnerships allow the stakeholders to address structural tensions in an environment that is free from the stresses of applied engagement. Said plainly, the contractual negotiation of power and engagement permits partners to discuss the terms of an engagement relationship before emotional and relational baggage develops. It is much easier to discuss power differentials in community-university partnerships in an abstract and indirect way, before the pressure of real circumstances can threaten to sour the relationship.

A drawback to the contractual approach is that it could create a very impersonal relationship. The optimal university-community relationship is nuanced and operates at both professional and personal levels. Effective engaged relationships are made up of people concerned with relevant community issues. Contractual obligations could create a rigid and distant relationship between the community and university.

Furthermore, the contractual approach assumes that the process that produces the contract equitably represents the views of each party. However, one party of the relationship might dominate the contract negotiations, creating an engaged relationship that is not reciprocal. In some situations, strong incentives or external pressures might coerce a partner to accept a contract that does not create a reciprocal relationship. Particularly in such a case, it is possible that the contractual structure will not account for all forms of power and need.

Communication Training

A second way to deal with power and recognize differentials in need in engaged partnerships is by providing communication training for participants. Effective communication is the linchpin that holds most partnerships together. Communication training can be desirable because it develops communication norms and approaches that can help engaged partnerships maintain high levels of reciprocity. Claims highlighting the importance of communication and democratic equality are also supported in political and social theory in a variety of ways. As capitalism reshapes the social, political, and economic spheres, citizens are no longer connected to historical understandings of political community (Allen, 2006). Citizens and community members, generally, are losing basic skills of civic communication and literacy (see www.americancivicliteracy.org). Formalized engagement training has the potential to develop the skills, attitudes, and communication patterns that not only support effective partnerships, but also jump-start deliberative democracy in this country.

A drawback to communication training is that some parties in the relationship might not be receptive; this approach also assumes effective communication is something that can be learned. Ideal-speech patterns tied to standards of deliberative democracy will likely marginalize groups not able or not willing to perform the communication norms (Habermas, 1984). Besides the potential to marginalize groups lacking certain speech and communication patterns, the time and expense associated with this approach might preclude it from being cost-effective. In addition,

because participants would gain different levels of understanding from the training, communication might still break down even when overall levels of communication improve.

Regional/National Engagement Governing Institutions

Although an unlikely solution for dealing with differentials in power and recognizing differentials in need, regional/national engagement boards, created to regulate and ensure standards of engagement, would have the potential to be highly effective in producing more reciprocal engagement relationships. Unlike statewide Campus Compact organizations, which catalog and connect partners, these proposed institutions would go one step further and act as a governing body. They would have the power to accredit engagement units, set professional standards, establish rules and regulations, and resolve conflicts between partners. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching applies its community engagement classification (http://classifications. carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/community_ engagement.php) to assess whether institutions of higher education achieve a threshold of engagement institutionalization. However, there is the potential to develop a more robust community engagement governing board that moves beyond the description and general assessment of community-university partnerships. Conceivably such governing boards would be a type of combined regional accreditation body and mediation board.

The main benefit of this type of institutional arrangement would be standardization of processes and levels of engaged partnerships. Although the previous point highlights the potential of a governing board approach, many issues remain that could limit the success of the proposed organization. For example, many community engagement parties might be reluctant to surrender their own levels of internal autonomy to external governing bodies.

From a financial, decision-making perspective community engagement efforts at most colleges and universities operate at the fringes. However, community engagement seems to be trending toward widespread academic recognition. As of 2010, over 60 colleges and universities offered a degree for some curricular program tied to community engagement, civic engagement, or community studies (Butin, 2010). Looming social, political, and economic crises might also create a window for community engagement to enlarge its function within academia as an avenue for renewing the larger public purposes of higher education. As more campuses offer academic programs, degrees, and certificates tied to community engagement, the likelihood of the conditions changing to support a national governing and accreditation board would seem to increase. Such a body could help move community engagement toward the core of the university by defining engagement standards as they apply to individual academic disciplines.

Conclusion

Management of interrelational power dynamics is intimately connected to the success of any relationship. Engagement partnerships between the community and the university are no different. As this article has demonstrated, how flows of power are understood depends on the subject's position in the relationship. From the community partner's perspective, this initial theoretical analysis provides a framework that can inform the engagement process and define a structure that can be used to communicate the impact of power.

More than a decade has passed since Ernest Boyer (1996) called upon the academy to reconsider its public purposes. The civic and community engagement fields have come a long way during this time. However, as a practice we are reaching a critical point in academic engagement maturation. Student affairs, academic affairs, and to a lesser extent faculty units, have produced very dynamic student and community programming for various forms of engagement. Also, it seems to be clear that service-learning pedagogies and forms of community-based research have secured a place within the university structure (Sandmann, Thornton, & Jaeger, 2009). Many challenges remain despite all these points of success, but community engagement scholarship is now in a position to critically examine the praxis without fear of reprisal.

Recognition of limitations and weaknesses within the civic and community engagement practice must be brought into the daylight with the confidence that critical examination can only strengthen the approach. Civic and community engagement will achieve its true potential only if community practitioners and university scholars collaboratively and honestly address these issues. Scholarship and practice need to begin considering public engagement in relation to larger social, political, and economic issues. Traditional administrative assessment will always have a place

in community engagement programming, but it is now time to consider how civic and community engagement efforts impact larger real-world issues. The focus should be on measuring the substance of partnerships and the degree to which conditions in the social, political, and economic spheres are impacted by these partnerships. The standard of success should be the degree of impact, not indicators tied to legitimizing the administrative structure of community engagement within higher education. We recognize that this work addresses only three of the many issues that would constitute a full account of power. Further theoretical work is needed in order to develop a more complex articulation of power in the context of engagement. The future sustainability and success of academic engagement depends on creating a theoretical basis that grounds descriptive and empirical research, particularly from the neglected community perspective.

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