Research and Perspectives on Development Practice
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in Community Development**

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1

Contents

Biographical Details

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Abstract

This paper is a synopsis of my original thesis, whose central focus was an exploration of the self-reflections of workers in Community Development on the relationship of social learning to their expressed values and behaviours. This relates particularly to practice as an Ally in Community Development in Ireland. The thesis emerged from my own personal learning and questioning about my place in society and how this location impacted on my practice. The theme was developed through an examination of literature theorising oppression, power, systems theory, psychology and critiques of Development. It was assumed that as values and norms from the dominant systems of society are internalised it is necessary to develop awareness of the source of our values and practices to understand and work with these internalisations. An emancipatory qualitative approach to research was taken, using 10 semi-structured interviews. It was found that social locational experiences had an impact on both the expressed practice and values of the participants. It was also ascertained that awareness of social location was an important factor in working as an Ally.

Introduction

This paper is a synopsis of my thesis originally entitled "The Importance and Impact of Social Location for Practising as an Ally in Community Development". This piece of research was concerned with questions around the importance and impact of awareness of place and self for practice in Community Development. The central focus of the thesis is exploring the relationship of social learning to expressed values and behaviour, particularly in practice as an Ally in Community Development.

This paper has three main sections. It opens with a brief outline of the theoretical framework on which this thesis was built before defining the central concepts of social location and Ally. The research areas are also identified. The second section describes the research undertaken, and the third section summarizes the data analysis and findings.

1. Theoretical Framework

Firstly, this paper takes a particular political stance; that society is made up of systems of oppression which impact on the person at a number of levels (personal to international), affecting us both consciously and unconsciously (Malim and Birch, 1998). Systems of oppression are experienced at material, physical, emotional, political, cultural and social levels (Naughton, 2002). These experiences also impact at a psychological level; our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours are all formed to some degree in response to these experiences (Moane, 1996).

In light of this stance, Development is considered as a system of oppression. The foundation of Development was (and still is?) the pursuit of economic growth and was programmed by the most powerful nations (Rist, 1997). Development was considered achievable through widespread transfers of information and technology from the industrialised countries to the poorer nations of the world (Leys, 1996). Although it is noted that Development emerged as a well-intentioned agenda to better the lot of people suffering from widespread oppression, it is in fact built upon and maintains these situations (Rist, 1997).

The context of the research is Community Development in Ireland. This is reflected on as a contributing oppressive force as it forms part of the wider Development system. This framework draws largely on the works by bell hooks (2000), Ann Bishop (2002), Robert Chambers (2005), and the theories of Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987). It is assumed that as values and norms from the dominant systems of society are internalised it is necessary to develop awareness of the source of our values and practices to understand and work with these internalisations. The diversity of practitioners in Community Development is examined from the inside out, researching the self-understanding of workers in the field about themselves, their backgrounds and their practices. This diversity is examined from the perspective of social location as concept and Ally as practice.

Before defining the key concepts of social location and ally, it is important to acknowledge the belief system through which these concepts were developed. The grounding of this research was founded on four personal beliefs; the belief in interconnectedness and moral action, the belief in social transformation, the belief in power and the belief in the creation of actions and meaning by both the social and personal world.

Key Concepts: Social Location

The construct of social location as a theoretical concept is a process that is in its infancy. There is a lot of literature dealing with individual aspects of our social construction e.g. race, gender, socio-economic status, age, formal educational level. However, there is a dearth of literature that deals with these factors collectively, despite the recognition of their interconnected nature (Bishop, 2002).

I use the term social location to incorporate the dynamic social and personal experiences people encounter, assimilate and/or

integrate. Our understanding of the world is built in part on our social background and our social experiences based on our social characteristics (Bishop, 2002). Each of us has a multitude of social characteristics. Some of these are seen as generally static or unchangeable, for example gender and race (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, et al, 2004). Others are more dynamic. They are acquired all through our life span, and are broadly defined as changeable within the larger social systems (e.g. formal educational level, geographic location, professional employment, socio-economic status, religious creed; ibid). However, although characteristics such as socio-economic status, or class grouping are theoretically dynamic, it is often difficult to change the position you are born into (hooks, 2000).

Our social location is where we stand in the present moment and it reflects changing social circumstances. It is the positions we hold within the social systems based on experiences of privilege and exclusion. Social location takes into account where we come from; our history; where we were born, how we grew up, and the experiences we have based on our social characteristics. Therefore, it is our past and our present and how they combine. Social location is also the future possibilities, our awareness of the systems and our experiences, and how we then navigate them. From this explanation, we can define social location as, "the dynamic positions we occupy in society based on our social background, social characteristics and social experiences; it is where we stand now, where we come from and the possibilities of where we are going".

Key Concepts: Ally

Palmer (2000, no page number) classifies those who work in Community Development as "insiders" and "outsiders", where an insider is one of the "we-people…or the local community" and an outsider is "an external change agent". Due to my social location, I have generally found myself employed as an outsider and this position has raised questions about my practice. The research questions emerged from this questioning of how I can best work with people with different social experiences, experiences that I may not share and may not understand.

At this point in my learning process, the answer that best fits this question is to practice as an Ally, as someone who is working out of an awareness of my social location in alliance with people from other social locations. Ann Bishop (2002, p.110) describes an Ally as someone who is:

Critical of the real power structures of…the world. They look at the world from a "structural" perspective. They have an understanding of themselves as part of a people or various peoples. They understand that if something is done to another member of their own group, it could have happened to them…Likewise "allies" understand that, as part of various oppressor groups…they did not individually bring the situation about and…that they must act with others to contribute to change…They understand that they are part of something much larger and older than they are. They take responsibility for helping to solve problems of historical injustice without taking on individual guilt.

From the definition above, it is possible to identify a number of characteristics of Allies; they have a broader and historical view of society, possess a framework of society that analyses power structures and utilize an ability to step outside situations while still maintaining a sense of the interconnectedness of the world.

Bishop (2002) uses the terms "Ally" and "oppressed" to differentiate between those who are uncovering their experiences of privilege while working in solidarity with people who experience oppression, and those who have experienced exclusion and who are working to uncover this and change the systems of oppression.

I differentiate between these groups in a slightly different way, as "Ally" and "Insider."[1] The term "Ally" refers to someone who has empathy with but not direct experience of the oppression and exclusion systems they are allying against, and who are actively engaged in their own awareness process of where they are located in the system. The term "Insider" refers to those who have directly experienced the form of exclusion they are working against, and who are actively engaged in their own awareness process of uncovering their location and working to change the systems of oppression. This is also to emphasise the expertise of the Insider in relation to their exclusion (Bishop, 2002).

1. The term "Insider" is distinguishable from "insider", where an insider is someone who may be working against oppression without necessarily being aware of his or her social location.

2. Research Areas

The research areas that were investigated are now outlined.

2.1 The Relationship between Social Location and Values and Social Location and Practice

From writings on oppression, it is asserted that there is an internalisation of values and norms of social systems and that these impact on the person. It is proposed that developing awareness of internalised norms and values involves understanding where they come from, how they are formed and how they impact on us, that is awareness of social location. This has provoked two related areas to be investigated, firstly the relationship between social location and values, and secondly the relationship between social location and practice.

2.2 The Relationship between Awareness of Social Location and the Journey towards becoming an Ally

It is also proposed that one way communities are formed are by people coming together to work against oppression (Clark, 1996). This raises questions about the place of people coming from outside and working in the community; if I am not working against my own oppression and I am not simply an 'outsider', I have concluded that one way to work is the way of an Ally. From my own experience, an integral part of becoming an Ally was the process of uncovering my own social location. Therefore, the final research area explores the concept of the Ally and investigates if there is a relationship between awareness of social location and the journey towards becoming an Ally.

3. Research Process

An emancipatory qualitative approach to the research was taken, using ten semi-structured interviews to explore the research areas; social location and values, social location and practice, and awareness of social location and the journey towards becoming an Ally. Questions were formulated using Appreciative Inquiry (Michael, 2005) as a basis to try and tap into the lifeworlds of participants. Data was coded thematically and analysed under the research areas.

3.1 Emancipatory Research Approach

The emancipatory approach is a political and ethical framework for conducting research, the key components of which are summarized below. This approach was chosen as it is critical of the dominant scientific positivist approach to research, which emphasises objectivity, neutrality and the concept of "innocent knowledge", where knowledge is seen as outside political agendas (Humphries, 1996). Secondly, the literature and research exploring issues of gender, race, class and sexuality has been very influential in this approach (ibid). These explorations have opened up the multidimensionality and interaction of position in society, a grounding theoretical element of this research piece.

3.2 The Politics of the Emancipatory Approach

The emancipatory approach is explicitly political. Research is regarded as inherently value-laden. The values of the researcher are intrinsic to the process therefore the scientific notions of objectivity and neutrality are refuted as problematic (Humphries, 1996). Research is considered as representing the values and interests of specific, usually powerful, groups. It generally "focuses attention on the powerless rather than the powerful…little attention is devoted to the analysis of the generative forces and processes that maintain… positions of dominance or affluence" (Baker et al, 2004, p.172).

To address this, the emancipatory research process is one of co-creation; the individuals and groups being researched are recognised as subjects rather than objects of research (ibid). The world is regarded as a social construction, of which both the researcher and the participants are a part (Humphries, 1996). Finally, the overarching aim of research is not simply to understand the world, but to understand it in order to change it, to "increase awareness of hidden or distorted contradictions…[to] direct attention to the possibility of social transformation" (Lather, 1991, p.151).

3.3 The Ethics of the Emancipatory Approach

The emancipatory approach as an ethical framework is built on five key components; the ethics of human rights, reciprocal research relations, equal power, building theory through dialogue, and reflexivity (Baker et al, 2004). This piece of research was time and resource limited and I was not able to facilitate practical attention to all five key elements. However, the ethics of the emancipatory approach were kept in mind at all stages of the research.

3.4 Qualitative Research Approach

The qualitative research approach was chosen as research is seen as a process that takes place in real world situations, paying attention to the social, historical and temporal contexts of both researcher and participant (Sarantakos, 1998).   In this case, the context is social location. Despite not being overtly political, the qualitative approach complements the emancipatory approach in a number of ways. It is regarded primarily as an interpretative inquiry, making it ultimately an ethical one (Sarantakos, 1998).   Research is again regarded as value laden, with judgements based on what the researcher considers important. As with the emancipatory approach, qualitative research is based on the assumption that the social world is a construction, with the researcher and researched regarded as both equally important elements of the same situation. Therefore, the framework chosen for this research is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism highlights the importance of learnt and altered meanings in the social world (ibid), which is consistent with my exploration of social location as learnt and altered through the navigation of societal systems of oppression.

3.5 Method

The method chosen for this research was semi-structured interviews. As the research topic was of a personal nature, I felt it was necessary to construct a process that would respectfully tap into lifeworlds of participants and explore their experiences. Interviews focus on the experiences of people in their own lives, and are important as the deeper areas of people's experiences such as values and meanings can be explored (Malim and Birch, 1998). Furthermore, interviews are considered a social encounter, presenting an opportunity for a dialogical process to take place.

I wanted to ensure that I would have common areas from which to begin the analysis, therefore the interview guide centred around three key areas; initial involvement in Community Development, ways of working in Community Development and importance of awareness of social location in Community Development. All interviews began and ended with the same questions (How did you become involved in Community Development? and How important do you think awareness of social location is for practice in Community Development?) The third key question related to a continuum of ways of working in Community, with endpoints identified as Insider and Ally.

3.6 Question Formation

I recognised that the research topic was of a personal and a sensitive nature and I did not want to ask questions that may be misconstrued, seen as disrespectful or would cause offence to people. Nor did I want to ask questions that would shut people down, rather than open them up to talk about their experiences. Therefore, I drew on the success of Sarah Michael (2005) and used Appreciative Inquiry when formulating questions. Appreciative Inquiry is founded on the belief that people and organisations grow towards that which gives them life and light (Michael, 2005). Questions were designed to draw out the positive elements of

situations. Appreciative Inquiry also makes extensive use of storytelling as a method, and I used this element in developing some of the questions.

3.7 Sampling

Snowball sampling was chosen as I felt it was important to talk to people who were already engaged in reflexive practice. This was based on the premise by Kemmis (2001, p.93), who also uses an emancipatory approach in his research. He states, "we believed we could more readily develop the critical approach in contexts where people…had begun to form a critical view about the nature and consequences of the practices in which they were engaged". Broad criteria for sampling were adopted to allow for an information rich sample (Patton, 1990), and to include a wide variety of people. Also, I did not want my own assumptions and biases about people's experiences to cloud the process.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on four sources. Firstly, I used a framework entitled "Journey towards becoming an Ally" which is a stage model based on my own journey thus far (Figure 1). Secondly, I used the three characteristics of an Ally from Bishop's definition above (broad and historical view, framework of society and contextual considerations). Thirdly, the distinction between action established in the system and lifeworld was utilized to determine what commonalities emerged from participants' reflections on their practice and values. Finally, the data was coded thematically and cross-referenced to uncover ideas that I had not included in the previous frameworks.
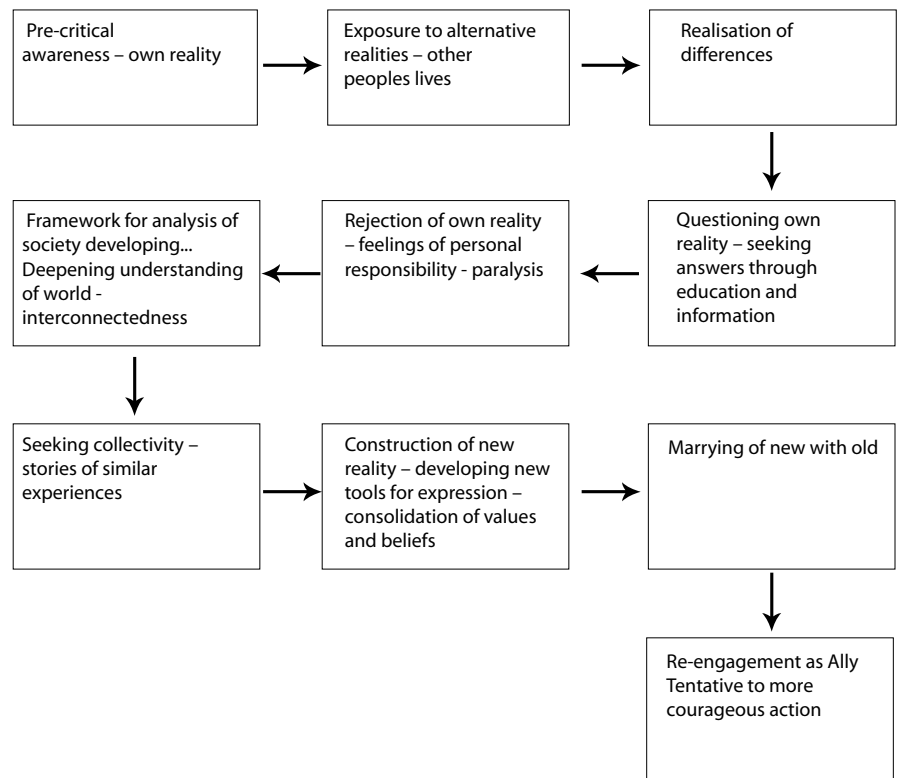
Pre-critical awareness – own reality	→	Exposure to alternative realities – other peoples lives	→	Realisation of differences

Framework for analysis of society developing... Deepening understanding of world - interconnectedness	←	Rejection of own reality – feelings of personal responsibility - paralysis	←	Questioning own reality – seeking answers through education and information

Seeking collectivity – stories of similar experiences	→	Construction of new reality – developing new tools for expression – consolidation of values and beliefs	→	Marrying of new with old

Re-engagement as Ally Tentative to more courageous action

Figure 1 Framework of my Journey towards becoming an Ally.

5. Data Results

The results of the research were presented in three separate but related sections. I used verbatim quotes from the participants to support the following summarised points. A synthesis of these findings is illustrated in Figure 2. The construction of Insider and

Ally as a way of working was held to be valid; all participants affirmed that they recognised themselves as working as Allies.

5.1 Impact of Social Location on Practice

Primarily, it was found that social location did have an impact on the practices of participants. These impacts could be positive and negative, and differed in depth across and within communities. Many participants described the opportunity (or lack of) to develop skills such as negotiation, and particularly the ability to effectively articulate one's position, as arising from their social location. Participants also spoke of the opportunity (or lack of) to access people and positions of power as dependent upon the same.

There were further advantages and disadvantages associated with social location. Social location was found to have a positive impact and referencing from one's own experiences gave insights into the experiences of others. However, a key disadvantage expressed was the differences in understanding resulting from different experiences.   The levels of experience within and across communities meant that in any given situation, some people are more directly affected or closer to the issues(s) than others. Some participants described this closeness of experience as having implications for whether they worked as an Ally or an Insider. Despite the stated differences, it was concluded that positive and negative impacts and differences in experiences could be used positively in a shared process, which highlighted the necessity for alliances between Insiders and Allies.

5.2 The Journey towards becoming an Ally

Secondly, it was found that a growing awareness of social location is intertwined in the process of becoming an Ally. This involves uncovering power, privilege and values. Many of the stages from my own journey towards becoming an Ally were evident in the journeys of the participants. This did not form a linear stage model as I had developed. Rather, common key periods (formative and education and training) were identified incorporating these stages. In light of the findings, the original framework was renamed as a "journey of deepening practice as an Ally". This journey may be characterised by the methods of deeply engaging with people, valuing the experiences of all people, a deep awareness of their social location, power, privilege and values, and the commitment to use the advantages of these in the process of social transformation. As such, there may be common identifiable stages of the journey, but the frequency and depth through which these are navigated is indefinable. As with other processes of self- reflection (Bishop, 2002), one may reach plateaus in learning, but rarely an endpoint.

5.3 The Impact of Social Location on Values underlying Practice

Thirdly, it was found that social location did have an impact on the values underlying practice. However, as this is a difficult area

to explore the findings are not robust. There was a commonality across practice and values underlying practice. Two key values of respect and openness were vital for the practice of space creation, involving engaging deeply with people, supporting and challenging, valuing everybody's experiences, and recognising the community as problem solvers. While there was an expressed correlation between social location and value formation, the depth of this relationship requires further study.

5.4 Characteristics of being an Ally

Finally, a noteworthy result of analysis was the identification of several key characteristics of being an Ally. These were: objective overview; knowledge of difference and acceptance of position; personal framework; acknowledgement of own positions of power; using privilege for the benefit of others; and the practice of space creation. This expands on the characteristics as outlined by Bishop (2002) and adds further to our understanding of practice as an Ally. A key finding in analysing the participants' journeys was the development of a personal framework through which participants negotiated their experiences. This may lead to the development of the psychological and emotional space necessary for taking a more contextual overview.

6. Conclusion

This paper summarised research exploring the relationship between social location and the expressed values and practices of people involved as Allies in Community Development. These research areas emerged from my own questioning of how best to work with people from different backgrounds and different social experiences, resulting from my own developing awareness of my position in society.

Social location was proposed as a means of understanding our place in the world, developed from my own experiences and drawing on literature theorising oppression, power and systems theory. It was assumed that values and norms from the dominant viewpoint of society are internalised. These may have negative impacts for those who experience privilege and exclusion based on their position as related to the dominant viewpoint. The multiple social characteristics of people result in a multitude of social experiences. These social experiences in turn influence the social learning of individuals. It was asserted that developing awareness of the source of our values and practices is necessary to understand and work with this internalisation.

The methodology used drew on the reflections of participants of their social locational experiences and resultant impacts. I utilised my own story of uncovering my social location and becoming an Ally as the starting point for this venture.

Results from the research found that differences in social location did result in different experiences, and that social location had an impact on the expressed practice and values of the participants, most notably around the questions of skill acquisition and

differences in understanding. It was also ascertained that awareness of social location is an important and intertwined factor for practicing as an Ally. Significantly, all participants appeared to have integrated the learning from their journey into their practice.

Bell (1997, pp. 13 –14) states:

Given the power of systems of domination to saturate both the external world and our individual psyches, how do we challenge and change them? In a context where we are all implicated, where we cannot escape our social positions, how do we find a viewpoint from which to act?

and concludes, "the lived experience [of people] offers one place to begin". It appears that the uncovering of social location is important to practice in Community Development where the integration of this learning forms an essential part of practicing as an Ally. I feel that this uncovering is a key concern in working to change the structures of inequality. This is a process of personal work that involves developing awareness of our own selves as workers in Community Development.

As people working in Community Development we need to be aware of the values that we hold, how much they are informed by the dominant system, how much the systems impact on our lifeworld and how we act based on these values. If oppression is maintained through the internalisation of positions of privilege/exclusion based on the values of the dominant worldview, these questions must be addressed. This study is offered as one possible door for exploration and hopes to contribute towards this understanding.

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