BEYOND THE GOLDEN RULE: EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE AND CHANGE IN ORGANISATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores a question that has arisen from my experience working and teaching in social work, and resonates with the experience of others: Why is it that practitioners working with others in anti-oppressive and emancipatory ways so often talk about their own management as oppressive and disabling? This question has surfaced now as I am preparing collaborative action research with practitioners and managers from a voluntary agency working with children's justice issues and participation. Recent conversations have included comments such as "how can practitioners work to empower and involve clients in decision-making processes if the decision-making in the organisation excludes them", statements that project teams feel undervalued by management, concerns that the number and length of meetings, written communications and administrative procedures impede the 'real work' with clients, and complaints about the opacity of central decision-making processes. I am not, however, framing the question as a problem. Problems call for solutions, and negative feelings expressed by one group in an organisation towards another may be considered part and parcel of organisational life. They may well arise from 'real' grievances; they may function as necessary release valves for emotion (Fineman 1991), or as expressions of the tension between the control and co-ordination structures in organisations and the professional autonomy of practitioners. However this tension between talked-of experience as practitioner and experience as managed is important for 'projects of inclusion' - specifically organisations and agencies striving for the participation in organisational planning, decision-making and action of those whose interests the 'practice' is primarily designed to promote. As will be discussed, this is firstly because of the practitioner's role as 'gatekeeper' and intermediary, and secondly

1 When procedures for the assessment and delivery of services for older people changed with the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act 1991, social workers in one local authority complained that they had 26 forms to complete for meals on wheels to be delivered.
because prevalent ways of explaining this tension can reveal current understandings and assumptions about the relationship of client and agency.

This paper also inquires into how stories, in the form of 'explanations of practice', with their associated metaphors can reveal implicit relationships, and ways of talking about them, between practitioners, clients and managers. These stories recognise social and psychological theories but in "(becoming) understood by the very people of which these theories speak .. (the social theories)...can be said to re-enter the very practices they claim to describe" (Krippendorff 1996 p. 312) and to legitimise and make them unquestionable. The examples and stories used here will be drawn from my perspectives on social work, my personal and social context - 'the baggage' I bring to the research (Bell 1998), although the question I am exploring has resonated with the experience of people from related fields - community and voluntary work, counselling and teaching. Writing this paper is a reflexive process; the stories and metaphors I discuss are those that I have used in making sense of my experiences, and how I have understood the actions and talk of others, and taking account of the importance of a reflexive approach to an investigation of metaphors (Palmer and Dunsford 1996). Re-describing the stories in this paper is like being the observer entering the domain of observation, and unravelling the legitimising processes by which they become taken-for-granted facts (for me); not just a recognition of a change of position but telling the stories for a differently constructed audience.

EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE, AND WORKING WITH 'OTHERS'

In this paper 'working with others in emancipatory and anti-oppressive ways' is used to describe practice that is explicitly, but not necessarily solely, designed to identify, and to counter, the disadvantage and discrimination experienced by the 'other'. Emancipatory practice assumes an ethic of fairness, equality and respect for difference\(^2\), an understanding that society is structured in terms of unequal power relations that disadvantage some groups in society and privilege others, on grounds of inherent or constitutive characteristics (age, gender, race, class, dis/ability etc.), and a commitment to action. Working in emancipatory ways is by no means uncontested in practice. A Foucauldian analysis of power structures in society raises the dilemma that the practice itself is situated within taken-for-granted structures and systems. 'Emancipate' and 'empower' raise questions about whether it makes sense to use the verb transitively - "in emancipatory dialogue people are neither alone nor can they be in charge" (Krippendorff 1995 p. 129). As a dialogical process, always open to being questioned, working in emancipatory ways does not 'fit' well with the demand for quantifiable output and performance indicators in organisations.

A puzzle here is how to refer to 'the other'. There is no one term that will stand for those who are not practitioners, but without whom there would be no practice\(^3\). The criterion I am using is what makes sense to me. Possible terms include 'client', 'carer', 'customer', 'user', 'service user', 'patient', 'consumer', as well as terms referring to the characteristic of the group with whom the practitioner is working - 'families', 'older people', foster carers', 'children and young people', 'the black community', 'the gay

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\(^2\) In Leonard's words " a recognition of the validity of the Other" (Leonard 1997 p. 164) as contrasted with the exclusion of the Other (through racism etc.). Talking of emancipation implies there are people who need emancipation 'from someone or something' ((Janks and Ivanic 1992)

\(^3\) "However we conceive or speak of these Others, even when we omit explicit references to them, always directs our listening, our (re)searching, and our interacting with these unnamed and possibly unknown Others" (Krippendorff 1996 p. 312) - including our practising.