Connected Communities

Power in Community: A Research and Social Action Scoping Review

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Executive Summary
This Scoping Review explores the academic debate on power and talks with communities about power. At a time when the state is proposing to ‘disengage’ from society and hand ‘power’ to communities, it reviews power in communities. The academic debate points to a paradigm shift in understanding power, from power over to power to. Although not all power over is dominating power, the latter remains the conventional form of power in practice. In talking to a range of groups in four socially varied communities across the north of England, it became clear that amongst those seeking change at the grass roots, most understand power in non dominating forms, as about cooperation, listening, sharing and enabling others. Non dominating forms of power, it is argued, offer the best potential for building participation and connecting communities. However, they are not the most effective for acting on power. Those who use them reject the way power is conventionally exercised and can end up acting on the margins and giving up expectations of wider impacts. The Scoping Review asks, therefore, how can non dominating forms of power become effective in changing power and power structures without reproducing dominating power?

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Introduction

This scoping review focuses on two concepts with strong practical as well as theoretical dimensions: power and community. Both remain highly contested, subject to meanings and practices which shift shape and significance over time. At present we are riding the cusp of a wave of interest in ‘community’. Paradoxically, this coincides with a similar high point in the emphasis on ‘individuals’. Foucault traced the latter back to an active process of ‘individualizing’, which began with the rise of the power of states in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Foucault, 2002:332) and ‘a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and of totalization procedures’ (ibid). In the last two decades of the 20th century, this individualization process acquired a whole new dimension as the state disengaged from its previous regulatory and socially interventionist guise. ‘These days’, wrote Zygmunt Bauman in his 2001 book on ‘Community’ (Bauman, 2001:41), ‘domination does not rest primarily on engagement-and-commitment; on the capacity of rulers to watch closely the movements of the ruled and to coerce them into obedience. It has acquired a new, much less troublesome and less costly - since requiring little servicing - foundation: in the uncertainty of the ruled as to what move, if any, their rulers may make next.’

Thinking ‘community’ in the age of uncertainty and enhanced individualisation requires, it is argued, distinct approaches. This paper suggests that, in particular, the idea of ‘power’ needs to be revisited in such a context. What would a society of more dispersed loci and forms of power look like? Theoretically, we need to review where the debate on power has reached by the early decades of the 21st century. Has our conceptual understanding of power and knowledge of the mechanisms of power given us new tools commensurate with the proposed reconfiguration of relationships between state and society? Empirically, we need better data on how power is understood in communities and how it shapes relationships within and between communities as well as in relation to powerful state and market actors.

At the same time as the state proposes a new phase of disengagement, it acknowledges that an atomised society is almost as problematic as a state driven one. ‘Communities’, like ‘civil society’ at the dawn (1980s-1990s) of what Bauman calls, the ‘times of disengagement’ (Bauman, 2001:39), are expected to supply the missing social glue in the individualising logic. However, this is to be a self adhesive variety rather than dispensed by the state. Self-adhesive social interactions nevertheless, raise the question of power as starkly as when the state first emerged to organise society. The ‘empowerment’ of communities, in other words, poses as many potential problems as the ‘empowerment’ of states did at the dawn of ‘modernity’.

With that in mind, this Scoping Review has reviewed the academic literature on power in order assess how it helps us to frame questions about power in community. It explores the intellectual shift from power over to power to; from power as emanating from an agent in a dichotomy of ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ to power as part of our social order, creative of our subjectivities but disposing us to reconfirm that social order. It discusses those theories which suggest we can in fact ‘act on power’ and the emergence of ideas of
‘empowerment’ and the design of tools to enable us to analyse power. Finally it turns to
communities themselves. The second part of this paper is based on ‘Power Talks’ with
participants from four very diverse communities in the north of England. The surprising
outcome of these community ‘Power Talks’ was that our participants were deeply aware
that their own understanding of power was at odds with the exercise of power by those
who they felt limited their capacity to act and influence their communities. It was their
sense of power as about sharing, listening, addressing conflict and fostering cooperation
which stood out in the conversations. A non dominating form of power was not a
normative ideal, but something in practice they aspired to and exercised as best they
could. However, it is very hard for them to influence those ‘in power’ or who ‘have
power’ in their communities or over their communities. Dominating power over is
convincing and conventional for many because it appears to offer an effective route to
action and change. Any alternative perspective has therefore to ask, how can non
dominating forms of power be equally effective without reproducing dominating power?

The Academic Debate. ‘Power- Over’ to ‘Power- to’: A Paradigm
Shift?

There has been a significant shift in the academic debate on power since the 1950s. As
Peter Morriss writes in the introduction to the second edition of his 1987 book on Power
(Morriss, 1987:xiii): ‘It is now also probably the dominant view that power is best
thought of as a capacity or disposition of some sort, and that “power-to” is more basic
than “power-over”’. He himself argues, correctly, that we do need to hang onto both
concepts. However, while the conceptual debate may have opened up the space for new
approaches to power, we are, I would argue, very far away from a view of power as
capacity to act and cooperate with others becoming intuitive and pervasive. Power as
domination remains the most commonly used form of power, unequally distributed and
thus exclusionary and limiting of participation. Rather than a paradigm shift, we have
seen a rebalancing in the academic understanding of power which is slowly filtering its
way into the social psyche, but too slowly yet to fundamentally change that psyche and
certainly not the form in which power is exercised. In the meantime, while power over is
not equivalent to dominating power, I would argue that it is the latter form of power
which still makes it difficult for other forms to be exercised, although we have a much
more sophisticated analysis of how power works in society.

The shift from asking ‘who has power?’ to ‘how is power exercised?’ opened up the idea
of power as the capacity to act. The idea that power is part of what society is, was a way
of taking power away from the dominating power wielding agent over others. The focus
on the agency of the latter has tended to generate an unhelpful dichotomy between the
‘powerful’ and the ‘powerless’ and a sense of power as negative. A range of ideas from
Foucault to Bourdieu and Giddens to Wartenberg, Hayward and Haugaard, despite
differences amongst them, have helped us understand how power is part of our social
world, and works to structure our subjectivity, actions and relations. Powerlessness is
less about lack of power in these readings, than about the ‘tacit consensus of the
dominated’ (Haugaard, 2002:227) to the expectations of others that they have no power. These ideas open up the possibilities of action on structures and social orders which condition or predispose people to tacitly accept and reconfirm what Bourdieu (2004:132-133) calls the ‘habitus’. We are not actually doomed to being either pre-determined by structures or determined by agents in our capacities to act on the world. We can use power to unconfirm social orders.

From Empowerment to Transforming Power

We are not powerless, but we cannot underestimate the difficulties of changing the script that makes us think we are. This has led a number of authors to focus on the ‘empowerment’ of others, and to develop tools to enable people, particularly in disadvantaged settings to analyse power. However, ‘empowerment’ without unpacking the idea of power itself, is no guarantee that the ‘powerless’ will use power differently to the ‘powerful’. For those interested in change, it is intuitive to strengthen the so-called ‘powerless’ against the so-called ‘powerful’. In practical politics, power not only appears to have a ‘face’ in the form of individuals who exercise power over but also because organising people for change is often easier when there is a face. ‘Hard’ power over remains the conventional understanding of how power operates and ultimately is seen as the only power which would enable the ‘powerless’ to collectively act for change, despite the rich theoretical debate which has opened up other possible ways of understanding power. Acting on power itself and extending the boundaries to fields of social action without reproducing that ‘hard’ power suggests a step beyond ‘empowerment’ to ‘transforming power’. However, is this any more than a normative ideal? This question brings us not just to how communities might act collectively towards the ‘powerful’, but whether and how they act collectively amongst themselves?

Power in Community

This question had to be approached empirically not just theoretically. Originally, the intention had been develop tools for discussing power with communities. However, the tools seemed to assume some ideas about power which we preferred to explore. The emphasis seemed to be on the powerful/powerless relationship, whereas we wanted to also research the social nature of power flows within as well as between communities and the powerful. The ‘Power Talks’ ended up being open ended discussions, in which the community members really drove the discussion along the lines they chose.

There has been relatively little discussion of power in community, although the academic discussion of power was originally generated through community power studies. However, the emphasis has been on the community’s power vis a is external powerholders, perpetrating a ‘myth of egalitarianism’ (Brent, 2009: 27). We chose four communities where we would ‘talk’ with selected groups and individuals about their understanding of power. We chose a diverse range of communities in order to see
whether ideas of power differ in different social contexts. Most of the people we talked to were selected because they were engaged in some kind of action process. Our communities were an ethnically mixed community in Broomhall, Sheffield, a mostly Pakistani community in Manningham, Bradford; a traditionally ‘white’ estate in Keighley; and the largely ‘white’ relatively more affluent community of Queensbury in Bradford.

Our stories from community activists and residents in our four areas highlight how complex our communities are. These are not homogenous, egalitarian social spaces where people are just waiting for the government to hand over ‘power’ so that they can pursue pre-formed agendas. All of our participants in our ‘Power Talks’ included people who have undergone significant social and economic changes which have disrupted their lives and often created fragmented social landscapes, with young people in particular struggling to find their way in the world and often ending up in trouble.

The poorest, most ethnically diverse communities showed the greatest sense of community activity. But this was also fragmented. Extending the boundaries of freedom for social action was very difficult while traditional authority structures limited the exercise of agency and young people in particular found no voice either within those structures or within those of the modern local state and political activity. In these contexts, those who managed to question power and its exercise ended up often in mediating roles, enabling those who feel powerless to trust that someone is connecting them to the world of the powerful. Addressing conflicts and social problems in communities becomes difficult without trusted mediators, and these individuals, who were committed to not reproducing dominating power, played an important community role. However, many found it difficult to impact on power and power structures. Most had become accustomed to seeing change in terms of ripples and drips.

Yet in the midst of this, what is striking about the discussions, is how everyone we talked to remained convinced that power was not about dominating the other. Non dominating forms of power was without exception the kind of power everyone aspired to: Enabling others, sharing with others, listening to others, opening things up to benefit the community, being honest and honourable towards fellow citizens and basing their power on respect. Many also talked about authority. They say sources of authority are declining (eg parental authority) and this worries them; or traditional authorities remain intact but block change. They often saw their understanding of power as connected to a view of authority, as something earned not given as a result of ascriptive status. Authority did not always imply power but it did rest on respect. Natural leaders emergent from community contexts commanded respect because of how they behaved and acted towards others. They were not necessarily expected to exercise power.

I conclude from these ‘Power Talks’, that a non dominating form of power does exist in practice. While most people are also very aware of dominating power, they question many of the attributes which enable dominating power to be legitimate, including when it is rooted in time honoured authority structures. Nevertheless, everyone in our ‘Power Talks’ found it hard to translate their non dominating exercise of power into an impact on the world. Here we reach the big challenge identified in this Scoping Review. How
might this form of power become effective without reproducing the dominating form of power it rejects?

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of ‘powerful’ state and ‘powerless’ community is a very limiting view of power in community. However, the other forms of power we found in our communities were limited in enabling action on power structures or power itself. Those who exercise those forms, often end up choosing to be on the periphery, or they are forced to take a long view of change and accept the ephemeral nature of power. They talked of change in terms of ‘ripples’ and ‘drips’. Sometimes, individuals emerge who navigate well between the worlds of those who see themselves as powerful and those who see themselves a powerless. But changing the way power is seen and understood is elusive. Making non dominating power effective remains a challenge. But arguably, this is precisely what could enable the poor to act on the world in ways which construct ‘community’ as something shared, cooperative yet able to handle conflict. Such a form of power would generate its own authority to build social orders based on values and norms which encourage people to find their own place in the world and to act for the good of all.

Future Research

Two clear lines of future enquiry emerge from this Scoping Review. The review explored various potential sources of making non dominating power effective, such as how ideas of immanent authority of a sister AHRC scoping review might strengthen such a form of power; Hannah Arendt’s ideas of consent and meaningful communication, and Freire’s ideas of Conscientization, this is an area which merits much theoretical as well as empirical attention. Secondly, we need more empirical study of power in community. How communities understand and practice power and how this impacts on their internal dynamics and their relationships with other communities, the market and the state.
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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx