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Radicalising Social Work: Involving Everyone; Including All Our Knowledges

Abstract

This discussion focuses on participation as an approach to radicalising social work, drawing on the experience of the author and many others in the UK and beyond. It explores the modern history of participation in policy and ideology, highlighting the empirical evidence that many people seem to feel they have little say over their lives and institutions affecting them and regard this as problematic. It highlights inequalities in participation and explores different ideological approaches to participation; their strengths and weaknesses, the emergence of service user movements; the gains from involving service users in research and the methodological and practical issues of excluding and including people's "experiential" or first hand knowledge as both practitioners and service users, the overlaps between the two groups, the importance of involving practitioners too and key issues emerging for participation.

Introduction

The particular focus of my work and life over a long period has been participation. One of the particular fields in which I have developed this interest has been social work. In this chapter I want to explore some of the key issues that have emerged for me in relation to participatory social work from these longstanding concerns. In this way I hope to make explicit both the empirical basis of my conclusions and how they connect with and are rooted in collective action and my own personal development. I should also make clear that for me this work has never been an isolated academic

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or professional activity. It has always, in a range of different ways, been inseparable from my personal life, both influenced by and affecting my own values and ideas. It has impacted on how I live as well as being shaped by my own identity and understanding (Beresford, 2016).

I have undertaken this work on participation in a number of different personal partnerships. The most longstanding of these has been with Suzy Croft, a long term social work practitioner, but they have also included numerous other collaborations with service users, practitioners, policymakers, educators and researchers. They have included collaborations with professional, management, regulatory and research organisations. They have included local, national and international projects, supported by both government and independent/charitable funders. As well as social work, I have undertaken work on participation in the context of other professions and areas of policy. The latter has ranged from land-use planning and youth services, through to community development, health and end of life care. This has led me to a concern with participation in politics, policymaking, ideology, occupational practice, management and governance, learning, research and knowledge formation. I have undertaken numerous research and development projects on participation including traditional, collaborative and user-controlled projects. These have highlighted issues of theory, ethics, philosophy, methods and methodology. The work has also focused on and involved a wide range of (overlapping) groups of people, including looked after children and young people, people facing bereavement, disabled and older people, mental health service users, poor people and people living on welfare benefits and so on. It has also sought to take account of diversity and different communities and to treat their involvement with equality

First issues to emerge for participation

Drawing on this experience, I now want to start exploring key current issues for participatory social work. Some of these have been highlighted over a long period – even if not necessarily addressed – and others have emerged more recently. The first major work we undertook on participation was *A Say In The Future* (Beresford, Croft, 1978). This was a study of public participation in land-use planning in North Battersea, then a very disadvantaged inner city area in England, going through a process of gentrification. We wanted to find out how much say local people felt they had in local decision-making and to get their views about what was needed locally. The study included a survey of a representative sample of 580 local households, including interviews with 637 people. Their comments were recorded in full, making it possible to piece together a more detailed and subtle picture of their points of view than quantitative data alone would allow.

For me, three major issues emerge from that study undertaken 40 years ago which still seem to resonate and hold strongly today. These are:

– Agencies, authorities and organisations might think that they are involving people but often most people do not feel they participate or have any meaningful involvement;
– While people may not have a sense of being asked what they would like to see, most would like to be involved and have suggestions to make when given an opportunity;
– Different groups of people feel more or less involved and excluded, reflecting wider barriers and discriminations.

The sense of non-participation

The planning consultation that we focused on in this early study was a formal statutory scheme required by national law and central government to decide on the future planning of the area. Land-use planning was where the first legal requirements for involvement were introduced in the UK, in the late 1960s. This participation exercise was heavily advertised and involved numerous meetings and activities. Yet most people were unaware of it (61%); only about 1% took part in any way. 57% of those surveyed thought the local authority planning department knew little or nothing of what they wanted; only 1% thought it was well informed; 62% thought that the local authority took little or no notice of their needs and wishes

Most people wanting to be involved and having ideas to offer

94% of people we interviewed thought that the local authority did not ask them what they wanted. They revealed an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and offered a clear measure of their estrangement from local government – “we have no say, they just carry on…whatever you say it makes no difference…They seem to ignore you”. Yet two thirds of people said that they wanted more say. They were able to identify a wide range of issues where they wanted to see change and improvement and these did not necessarily reflect dominant policy agendas.

Inequalities in participation

The people who did get involved in this participation exercise bore little relation to the overall local population. There was a predominance of white middle class participants. Groups with the greatest social need were least likely to be represented. There were only a handful of black and minority ethnic people and no local young people, for example, present at the public meetings that were a key element used in the consultation. Older and middle aged people seemed to be the least demanding of more say, in some cases it appeared worn down by their lack of say in the past. Younger families with children, particularly small children and local people from black and minority ethnic communities were the most assertive, reflecting perhaps the particular needs and difficulties they faced in the area. Because of young people's particular lack of say, for example, in our main survey they often assumed it was their parents we wanted to speak to, we undertook an additional survey of young people. They were well informed and painted the same picture of the area's needs and problems as their elders. Most disturbing was their strong sense that the powers that be neither understood nor were interested in their problems or would take any notice of what they had to say.

I have set out data from this study in detail, even though it was not focused specifically on social work, because there have been very few such comprehensive large scale studies of public participation and yet these findings generally seem to reflect subsequent evidence and experience more broadly. They also offer significant insights for social work. Subsequent evidence suggests that all these issues continue to hold true and be central for our understanding of participation. There are serious inequalities in who gets involved; participatory initiatives organized by government, policymakers and service providers are often seen as tokenistic by service users. Yet despite this most people want to get involved - if they have a sense that such involvement can lead to change – however modest. People generally are very realistic about what can be achieved, recognizing there are numerous interests to be negotiated, change takes time and so on.

It should also be noted that at the time of the study a left-of-centre Labour council was in power in the area, with a commitment to social justice and a concern for local people in need. However, their public participation exercise seemed to be undermined from the start by many local people's distrust of and disaffiliation from the local authority. The methods used to involve people were inherently discriminatory, advantaging those with conventional verbal and written skills. Methods like public meetings and writing in with comments were unpopular and impractical.

It is sometimes argued that people don't necessarily want to be involved in policies and services. For example, why would anyone want to be involved in rubbish collection or sewage, so long as these are properly carried out. The problem is that without such involvement, they may *not* be. Also as a rule the more closely services impact on people's lives the more they want to be involved. And of course social work and social services can impact very directly and intimately on people's lives. There is also a tendency to confuse people's non-involvement with apathy, rather than the sense of powerlessness that is more often communicated when they are actually asked.

From participation to consumerism

A Say In The Future focused on one inner city area, but was concerned with the participation and views of "everyone" in that area. One of the earliest discussions of social work and social services that I was involved in – Community Control Of Social Services Departments was similarly concerned with the involvement of "all" stakeholders – service users, workers and other local people, even though we were particularly concerned with the "control their users have over them" (Beresford, Croft, 1980). As we said at the time,

> [Service] users however are only one of the interest groups involved. There is also the community more generally and the fieldworkers who actually provide the services. All seem to have little control of social services and their exclusion seems like different facets of the same problem; of the way social services are structured and organized and the way political control operates over them (*op. cit.*: 4).

While the *Seebohm Report* which established social services departments in the UK called for the maximum involvement of "individuals and groups in the planning, organization and provision of social services" little such involvement of service users or other local people seemed to be identified subsequently (*Seebohm Report*, 1968; Deakin, Wilmott, 1979). Rose Deakin and Phyllis Deakin found little involvement of service users and other local people in one of the two boroughs they studied. There were in addition major problems in the other. Participation in both boroughs seemed to be mainly a matter of using volunteers in service delivery.

The shift in UK national politics to the New Right from the late 1970s, which coincided with rising interest in participation, meant that there was a growing emphasis on cutting public spending and services and an increasing interest in people "looking after themselves". Thus one emerging meaning of participation has primarily related to redistributing "responsibility", rather than power or control. Another overlapping meaning, also emerged about the same time, underpinned by the same right wing ideology. This has framed participation in "consumerist" terms. It has tended to focus attention narrowly on the user or customer/consumer of services like social work, rather than addressing all interests and perspectives, as for example, we sought to in *Community Control of Social Services Departments*. It has also become the dominant discourse in what has come to be known as "user involvement".

This interest in involvement/participation across policies and services has thus tended to be tied to reactionary pressures which have sought to weaken and reduce public services and state spending, prioritized the market instead and been based on increasingly expecting people to pay for services and support. It has also been associated with the philosophy of 'new public management', based on business management models from the private sector (NPM) (Simmons et al., 2009) which has similarly been linked with neo-liberal ideology.

If the earlier interest which I identified in participation highlighted the importance of involving service users, workers and other local people, and their shared interests and concerns, this consumerist/managerialist approach has created pressures in a different direction. Thus calls to listen to consumers have often been polarized against the rights and say of workers, as if the latter inhibited or opposed service users' say. In the UK consumerist rhetoric has been associated with increasing restrictions on the employment rights and conditions of workers and political attacks on the legitimacy and expertise of professionals. We have seen the increasing devaluing of professions like teachers, nurses and indeed social workers. Service users have also been set against other local people, by being presented as a cost on public expenditure or a threat to social cohesion – which the latter have to bear. We have thus seen right-wing pressures for participation used to serve *divisive* rather than unifying purposes in modern politics and policymaking.

Participation and conflicting ideologies

It is important to be aware of this regressive development in taking forward participatory approaches to social work. This leads us to another theme that has shaped the development of participation in social work as well as more generally – the role of ideology in its development. While as I have indicated consumerist approaches to user involvement and participation have tended to predominate internationally, this has only been one of two key ideological forces which have underpinned pressure for participation. The other has been one inspired by commitments to the democratization of policy and services; social justice and more say for service users and workers. These two ideologies reflect the rival political forces emerging from the last quarter of the twentieth century; neoliberalism and new social movements. They also have different origins. While the pressure for democratization of policy and provision came from service users and their allies, that for market driven consumerist approaches had its origins in state and service system (Jordan, Lent, 1999; Todd, Taylor, 2004).

The increasing recognition of overlaps

If consumerism tends to divide us on the basis of exchange relationships, then democratizing and empowering approaches to participation encourage solidarity and mutual understanding. This has been reflected in the increasing recognition in recent years of overlaps rather than divisions between us as service users, carers, practitioners and people more generally. The truth is none of us can assume we are silos separate from others and that situations can't change. While historically the roles of social worker and "client" or service user, were often heavily boundaried and restricted, so that the sort of person who would be seen as suitable to be a professional practitioner, or likely to need help on the received end of services, would be strongly demarcated by issues of class, education, background and income, this has significantly changed. Not only have potential barriers become more permeable, but attitudes and opportunities have also changed. Thus, for example, if social workers in Victorian and Edwardian Britain were recruited from a narrow group of white upper and upper middle class men and women, like Octavia Hill or Clement Attlee, that has long since changed internationally.

Perhaps even more significantly attitudes and understandings about who and what may make for a good social worker have also changed. This became particularly evident with the emergence of "radical social work" in the 1970s (Bailey, Brake, 1975), but it has also been especially influenced by the emergence of new social movements of welfare service users beginning about the same time, including the disabled people's, psychiatric system survivors' and looked after children and young people's movements (Beresford, 1999). They began to highlight the kind of social work that they felt would be helpful from their experience. As service users and their organisations and movements became more visible, particularly from the 1980s, new alliances began to emerge between professional organisations, trades unions and service user groups and organisations. They highlighted their common concerns and shared goals.

Social work has been the site of some of the biggest innovations in this area and within that professional education has emerged as a particularly significant site and opportunity for change. Service users have seen it as having the potential to "change the culture" of practice by changing the socialization of new practitioners. Service users have emphasized the importance of educators and trainers listening to them and building on what they find helpful. Some pioneering service users became "user trainers" and "user educators", influencing the content and process of professional social work education (Beresford, 1994). By 2003, such user and carer involvement was a requirement in all aspects and stages of UK social work professional education and was supported by funding from central government.

Practitioners in health and social care, in turn, also began to feel confident enough to come out about their own experiences of disability and distress and to argue that these could represent strengths rather than weaknesses for practice, increasing empathy and understanding with service users, building trust and encouraging openness between them. At one point, in 2007, the then UK regulator, the General Social Care Council was officially investigated and found to be discriminating against practitioners with experience of mental health problems, where these were not adversely affecting their “fitness to practice” (Boxall, Beresford, 2016).

Increasingly in the UK and elsewhere, people are being recruited to be social workers who have experience as service users, where they are able to demonstrate that they have the necessary skills and qualities to become good practitioners. They are not just being confined the kind of “peer worker” roles which have developed in related professions and areas of provision, which can be restricted to ancillary jobs and associated with glass ceilings (Voronka, 2017).

Social work academics are increasingly to be found in British universities who are “out” about their service user experience and see it as a valuable resource to draw upon in both their teaching and their role as tutors with students. New initiatives like the international network PowerUs are also highlighting new ways of building on the common cause of social workers and service users. The PowerUs network, for example has developed the philosophy of “gap-mending”, first in Europe and now beyond, emphasising the importance of service users and professional students working and learning together, valuing their different perspectives and experience and building trust and understanding (Askheim et al., 2017). Shaping Our Lives, the UK service users’ organisation and network recently explored the challenges faced by service users in negotiating their dual role of both being a service user representative and recipients of services. This offers a valuable aid both to disabled people who are thinking about taking part in involvement activities and for service providers who want to create services that meet the needs of people who use them (Meakin et al., 2017).

User involvement in research

However, occupational and professional training has only been one of two key sites for the user involvement advanced by service user organisations and movements internationally. The other, no less important, has been research and knowledge development.

Organised service user interest in research first emerged from the disabled people's movement although it has subsequently gained much wider interest across groups. Its impetus was the sense disabled people felt of being victimised by conventional research. They saw it as biased and over-medicalised and as a result, they wanted to develop a different kind of research – one which they saw as relevant, helpful and empowering (Barnes and Mercer, 1997; Barnes et al., 2002). The emancipatory disability research which they developed – and other expressions of user controlled research which followed it, like mental health service user/ survivor research, place an emphasis on research which:

- Equalises research relationships between researchers and researched;
- Involves service users fully and equally in the research process;
- Works to support the empowerment of service users;
- Is committed to making broader social and political change (Beresford, Croft, 2012).

Research was initially a key focus of the disabled people's movement and has since been an important locus of activity among other service user movements as well. This is because of the major role that research has long played as a key source of *knowledge*. It tends to be identified as the most rigorous, reliable and systematic method of knowledge production. This leads us to the issue of the knowledge base of social work – as well as of health and welfare more generally and also ultimately to why it is so important that the perspectives of service users and indeed practitioners have tended to be neglected and devalued.

Traditional positivist research has emphasised values of neutrality, objectivity and distance. By claiming to eliminate the subjectivity of the researcher, the credibility of the research, the rigour, reliability and replicability of its findings are seen to be optimised. Service users and their organisations, however, have challenged this. They have questioned the "unbiased value-free" position, based on professional expertise of the researcher which is seen as a central tenet of such research. User involvement in research, particularly user controlled research calls this into question, with its commitment to making change, involving service users and valuing their subjective knowledge.

Moreover, while there has been widespread policy and research support for such participation, it has itself come in for significant methodological attack for breaching these principles of traditional positivist research. Central to this is its introduction of and valuing of what has come to be called *experiential knowledge*; that is to say knowledge based on people's subjective and lived experience, rather than professional training or research and experiment. Such experiential knowledge has been granted less value and credibility under the operation of traditional research values and principles. Instead a hierarchy of knowledge has been seen to exist with that generated through research randomised trials seen as the gold standard and first hand accounts seen as having the lowest status (Glasby, Beresford, 2006). The knowledge claims of researchers without such direct experience are seen to be stronger.

The importance of experiential knowledge

However service users have turned these arguments on their head. They have argued that by devaluing experiential knowledge we lose a key knowledge source. They also highlight that this means crucially that if an individual has direct, lived experience of problems like disability or poverty, or of oppression and discrimination, of cuts and “austerity”, of racism and sexism, when such traditional positivist research values are accepted, what they say – their accounts and narratives – will be seen as having less legitimacy and authority. Because people experiencing hardship will be seen as “close to the problem”, they cannot claim they are “neutral”, “objective” or “distant” from it. So, in addition to any discrimination and oppression they already experience, they are likely to be seen as a less reliable and a less valid source of knowledge. By this logic, if someone has experience of discrimination and oppression, they can expect routinely to face further discrimination and be further marginalised by being seen as having less credibility and being a less reliable source of knowledge.

At the same time, the devaluing of experiential knowledge is increasingly coming to be seen as problematic. This has unfortunately been a role historically played by much social research, where problems only come to be seen as “real” when they are reported by researchers and other “experts”. Then it is their interpretations and versions of issues and phenomena which are accepted. This issue of marginalising the knowledge of particular vulnerable groups has begun to be talked about in terms of “epistemic violence” (Liegghio, 2013) or “epistemic injustice” (Fricker, 2010), meaning devaluing and marginalising knowledges of people who suffer abuse, discrimination and oppression. Increasing international interest in what has come to be called “public, patient involvement” in research thus raises the uncomfortable issue of including experiential knowledge centrally and on equal terms with other kinds of knowledge. At the same time it means working towards achieving epistemic justice and ensuring that everybody can contribute to creating a general knowledge base and that perspectives of entire social groups are no longer excluded from that process. We are beginning to see the real involvement of ordinary and disadvantaged people in research, for example people with learning difficulties, who communicate differently or experience dementia (Faulkner, 2004). There is also a growing body of work and discussion about user controlled research where people who have traditionally been the objects of research are now carrying out their own research and so restoring their epistemic existence (Beresford, Croft, 2012).

The importance of *all* practitioner knowledge

However, this concern with experiential knowledge also highlights important issues about the involvement of *practitioners* in knowledge formation. It brings us back now to the issue of the frequent exclusion of current practitioners from mainstream social work discourse and the potentially negative consequences this can have. One survivor researcher has developed this discussion. She argues that it is essential for the service user to foster their *first person* perspective and sees talking in the third person as the privilege of the non-service user, non-abused or oppressed person. But Russo has also worked as a social worker and while she believes it is crucial for accounts from the first person (the service user) to be valued and prioritised, she has also introduced the *second person* into the discussion – the *you* – and for her, here the you is the social worker. If there is to be work and a meaningful, equal relationship between service user and practitioner, she suggests, the practitioner must recognise themself as the second person in the relationship; they must be aware of themselves and bring themselves to it (Russo, 1997, 1999, 2013).

Thus as a person has their unique experiential knowledge as a service user, so does the worker as a practitioner. This has also been described as “practice wisdom” – what you learn from doing the job – and it should not be substituted for user knowledge, but it is an experiential knowledge of its own – underpinning the other half of the relationship between service user and practitioner. In addition, just as service users argue that they are much more than passive recipients of care and support; they may be parents, partners, students, volunteers, community activists, workers and so on, so social workers are much more than the sum of their professional learning. We all of us have complicated and multiple identities. We only have to think of all the different roles and relationships we each may have. None of us has monolithic or uniform identities. Identities are complex, although sometimes we are made to simplify them. Thus social workers are much more than their professional socialisation and learning. They have their own subjectivity, their own experiential as well as professional knowledge.

I want to stress here the value of social workers drawing on all of themselves, not to have to deny parts of themselves in their work. Reducing themselves to a narrow understanding of their professional role and status is only likely to increase the gap between service workers and users, risks of alienation, “othering” and inequality. As has been seen, we should remember that there isn’t a specific or discrete group of “service users”. While we may be in many different places and relations to it, needing help and support is something that in our increasing harsh and unequal world, can happen to anyone, including social workers. Moreover another of the valuable benefits of user involvement has been that people with lived experience of hardship, loss, abuse and using services, are now increasingly recruited to become social workers, with that experience coming to be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Participation is about including all of us

There’s one final point to make about participation in relation to social work. It has to be concerned with ensuring the diverse involvement of all concerned – on equal terms. Shaping Our Lives, with government support, carried out a major four years research and development project which highlighted just how many groups of service users tend to get left out of participatory initiatives. We identified five key groups of service users who are excluded on the basis of:

– Equality issues; in relation to gender, sexuality, race, class, culture, belief, age, impairment and more;
– Where people live; if they are homeless, in prison, in welfare institutions, refugees and so on;
– Communicating differently; if they do not speak the prevailing language, it is not their first language, they are Deaf and used sign language etc;
– The nature of their impairments; which are seen as too complex or severe to mean they could or would want to contribute;
– Where they are seen as unwanted voices; they do not necessarily say what authorities want to hear, are seen as a problem, disruptive etc. (Beresford, 2013).

Similarly there needs to be recognition of the diversity embodied in the social work workforce and efforts made to encourage and support it. Thus, if we are genuinely to support a shift to more participatory social work and to accept and internalise the value and legitimacy of people’s lived experience and their own knowledge, then we must also both value everyone and all of who we are – and not try and isolate that of us which has traditional expertise, from that of us which connects with lived experience. Our goal must be to include all user and practitioner knowledges and all of our selves as researchers.

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