Introduction to the Client Empowerment issue

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This special issue on Client Empowerment tackles a range of important practical and theoretical concepts that are essential reading for those who are committed and interested in this subject. Peter Beresford and Suzy Croft in the first paper of the issue put participation in Social Work in ideological, historical and theoretical context. They suggest that unless participation is critiqued in this careful way, innovation based upon it, is likely to be qualified and restricted in its potential and impact. Initiatives in empowerment, they conclude, should be developed in close and equal partnership with user controlled organisations and service user analysts and researchers.

I (Monica Dowling) am interested in the link between quality assurance, quality enhancement and client empowerment. I suggest that client empowerment as a process is not without its difficulties but is central to the future direction of policy and practice in this field in the UK and internationally.

Una Medina, Sharon Rogers, Mario Rivera and Christina Shapiro suggest that where one is located on the hierarchy of needs affects the meaning or hierarchy of values that one assigns to programme opportunities. When one's basic needs are not met, then acquiring food or shelter becomes more immediate and important that acquiring long term skills through educational job training. Programme developers in this study ranked Client Empowerment programmes more desirable than quick fix programmes such as free food and free rent because client empowerment programmes offer a long term outcome that can help clients break out of their poverty cycle. The researchers devise and evaluate an innovative programme which has long term deferred gratification but also contains short term basic needs gratification as an incentive. Low income clients, who previously ignored the weatherisation workshops which were intended to help them save money on their utility bills, were now keen to enrol and the workshops were full up because they were linked with the incentive of free food and toys. Clients changed their energy use over a longer time period by learning and enacting new behaviours to weatherising their homes. These clients then became change agents inviting neighbours and relatives to weatherisation workshops. This exciting study suggests hybrid programmes are more likely to be successful both in the US and in other parts of the world in changing client's perceptions and behaviour.

Janet Seden writes about how important it is to have committed and innovative management if service user participation is to succeed. She suggests that it is difficult for managers and other professionals to achieve partnership with service users if they themselves feel disempowered by top down management styles. She also questions whether there is a "glass ceiling" for service user involvement, influence or control, especially in larger and bureaucratical welfare organisations.

Joanna Bornat and Jan Walmsley note that biographical methods are increasing recognized as making a positive contribution to research and practice in Health and Social Care. They question whether biography is empowerment or appropriation and demonstrate such claims using a matrix with axis of "bottom up" to "top down" and "research" to "practice". They propose that the matrix helps to identify three aspects of biographical work in relation to empowerment. Firstly, they suggest that the research project has it own biography and the matrix helps to map and check shifting empowerment balance during its lifetime. Second, they consider the interest of stakeholders and how different stakeholders shift in their understanding and appreciation of the biographical in their own and others lives. And finally, they suggest that a biographical approach can enlighten and change awareness, "provide a voice", but the extent to which they can alter the condition in which people work and live is limited.

Richard Beinecke and Jonathan Delman note the lack of client or consumer involvement in research and intervention design. They highlight the role of partnership models, client run research organisations; community based participatory action research and academic consumer researchers. They conclude that involving clients in research and evaluation can have high dividends because: it strengthens the research process; it can lead to greater utilisation of research findings and improves public administration, planning and management.

Rekha Prasad highlights the situation of women in India and proposes that making women more economically powerful so that there is a greater degree of equality in the workplace can be achieved though information and communication technology alongside a knowledge based service sector. Learning and benefiting from ICT requires training, affordable access to technology, information relevant to the user and a great amount of support to create enabling environments. With gender sensitive programmes so that deliberate steps are taken to remove barriers to women's participation, women can become financial pillars of their society and achieve greater equality and independence.

Marvin Pichla describes in his case study how innovations in a local welfare to work programme enhance client empowerment. In this pilot project, participants became responsible for maintaining their own participation log and if an appropriate employment opportunity did not present itself, the project allowed for recordings of intermediate achievements on every participant, whether that is obtaining a high school diploma, securing a licensed day carer provider, completing a substance abuse course or arranging for good transportation. The pilot encouraged and highlighted all of these non-employment achievements so that clients were empowered to "grow themselves to work.".

Three book reviews add to the sum of knowledge in this issue on client empowerment and moving from good to great work in the Social Sector. Howard Doughty gives excellent reviews of Mo McPhail's book on Service user and carer involvement and Alison Petch's book on health and social care, while Raymond Lemay has extremely positive comments to make about Jim Collins' further work on lessons in good to great that can be applied to the human service sector. Jim Collins' plea at the end of his book on how we can all make a significant contribution is something that all these authors who have contributed to this issue have done. Their contributions have emphasised the many ways in which client empowerment is understood and the practical working examples have contributed to a further understanding of what is possible and achievable in this field.