Voluntary Sector Working Paper

Service User Empowerment in a Disability Charity: the rhetoric and reality

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Contents

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study looking at service user empowerment within a disability charity which is a large voluntary sector organisation (VSO) providing a range of services to disabled people in the United Kingdom. It draws on different conceptual frameworks of power and the related models of empowerment.

The findings demonstrate that there is no clear definition of empowerment, that the VSO employs different strategies and models for service user empowerment but that, ultimately, strategic control of the organisation remains with the Board of Trustees and senior staff at Central Office. These findings contradict some of the organisation's rhetoric surrounding service user empowerment.

Acknowledgements

About the author

Annie Hedges worked as a Project Manager in the voluntary sector whilst completing her MSc in Voluntary Sector Organisation at the LSE from October 2003 to September 2005. She takes a particular interest in empowerment and engagement of individuals and communities by VSOs. Annie now works as a Researcher for the Office for Public Management, a not-for-profit employee-owned research consultancy that works with public organisations and VSOs to improve social results for service users.

1. Introduction

In recent years, service user empowerment has increasingly become a 'buzz word' in the voluntary sector and also in the wider social policy context (Starkey, 2003). However, despite the rapid rise in popularity with both government and funders, empowerment remains a contested concept with no clear definition readily available (Deakin, 1996). A lack of clear definition means the term 'empowerment' can potentially accommodate many theoretical positions, and could even serve as a justification for oppressive practices (Humphries, 1994). It is within this hazy world that this research aims to define, map and come to an understanding of service user empowerment within a disability charity.

A traditional disability charity was chosen as the case study for this research to bring an extra dimension to the study. The rise of the disability movement has raised important questions about the authority of traditional disability organisations, especially around the issue of voice and whom they speak for (Oliver, 1996). With this in mind, the research sought to find how (if at all) a traditional disability charity had responded to this challenge and what differences (if any) there were between an official policy stance and how service users experience and engage with the organisation.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is:

- to identify how service user empowerment is conceptualised in policy documents and by senior managers, staff and service users;

- to explore the various strategies for service user empowerment and draw tentative conclusions about their relative effectiveness;

- to explore the dynamics between staff, service users and the concept of empowerment.

The research does not aim to *measure* the level of empowerment in the organisation as a much wider data selection would be needed to give any accurate indication.

Overview

- **Section one is a review of the existing literature.** It provides definitions for the various concepts of power and empowerment, explains how they relate to one another and sets out the strengths and weaknesses of the varying approaches.

- **Section two describes the case study.** It details the methodological approach selected for the research, how the research was designed and for what reasons, how it was conducted and the tools used for the analysis of the data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings.

- **Section three discusses the research findings,** exploring the difference in the rhetoric and the reality of service user empowerment within the organisation; how different stakeholders within the organisation conceptualise service user empowerment; the different strategies for empowerment employed by the organisation; and the dynamic between staff, service users and empowerment.

- **Section four provides a conclusion to the research**, summarising the key findings and suggesting wider theoretical and policy implications that stem from the research.

2. Literature Review

This literature review explores the existing literature around power and empowerment and assesses the relative strengths and weaknesses of the varying approaches. There is no single concept or definition of power. Instead power can be understood as involving a number of competing concepts. Similarly, the term 'empowerment' is contested with different conceptual understandings of power informing different models of empowerment (Deakin, 1996). The selection of a particular conceptual framework of power has profound implications for the conclusions drawn about the most effective method of empowerment. For this reason, the review will consider different conceptual frameworks of power alongside corresponding methods of empowerment. The literature review will also touch on espoused theory and theories-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1974) to illuminate the potential differences between the organisation's rhetoric and the reality of service user empowerment.

Pluralism and consumerist empowerment

The pluralist approach to power studies observable behaviour and outcomes to find out who prevails in decision-making and therefore who has power (see, for example, Dahl (1989)).

Power is conceptualised as being able to influence the outcome of decisions. A key concept in the pluralist approach is the idea of the individual, rational actor who is able to recognise their own preferences, make informed choices and decisions based on these preferences, and attempt to influence decision-making accordingly (Lukes, 1974). The consumerist model of empowerment corresponds with a pluralist conception of power. Individuals become empowered consumers when they are able to express preferences and make choices about the services they receive (Robson et al., 1997). There are varying 'types' of choice such as choosing other organisations to deliver the service or consulting users' views on the delivery of a service (Barnes and Prior, 1995). It is assumed that decisions are made on the basis of a rational and objective assessment of information available. Therefore, when investigating the 'control' of organisations, researchers focus on the structures and processes of governance and organisational decision-making (Robson et al., 1997). Indeed, Morris (1994) contends that the amount of power service users have can be measured by how much influence users have on important decisions.

However, the consumerist model of empowerment has been open to criticism on a range of levels by a number of academics and practitioners (see Barnes and Prior, 1995; Barnes and Walker, 1996; Drake and Owens, 1991; Taylor, 1996). Taylor (1996) argues that approaches to empowerment that are borrowed from the literature that relates to the commercial goods market has limited application to the voluntary sector. She argues this is due to the fact that VSOs often work with vulnerable client groups. In a consumerist model of empowerment there is an assumption that service users can choose between services and that they have the power of 'exit' if they do not like a particular service (Hirschman, 1970). However, people with impairments, who need assistance in everyday tasks such as getting dressed or eating, may have no prospect of 'exit' and consequently no choice (Barnes and Walker, 1996). Furthermore, expanding choice does not necessarily mean that a significant level of control is conceded and power relations within the organisation may remain unchanged (Drake and Owens, 1991). Consumerist approaches to empowerment may allow VSOs to compartmentalise the issue of empowerment rather than changing organisational structures over which users have no control. A two-year project concerned with the development of user-centred community care concluded that user involvement requires big organisational changes and the issue cannot be 'hived off' as a separate area of work (Goss and Miller, 1995). Without organisational change the process of empowerment can become objectified as a thing – 'a thing that can be delivered by those who have it to those who don't' (Oliver, 1996: 50). However, outside professionals cannot expect to control the outcomes of authentic empowerment as power cannot be bestowed by one party to another (Rowlands, 1995). These criticisms levelled at the consumerist model of empowerment demonstrate how equating choice and access to the decision-making process with empowerment can be misleading.

Choice may also be disempowering when it is experienced as risk. Too many choices can be overwhelming and vulnerable groups may not have the information or experience to exercise their judgement effectively (Barnes and Prior, 1995). This brings into question the assumption of the rational, individual actor on which pluralist conceptions of power are based. Additionally, users of services may be more concerned with the quality of the service than its management (Deakin, 1996; Robson et al., 1997). So it seems that choice and the ability to make decisions and influence decision-making processes in an organisation is not necessarily empowering for service users. If choice is divorced from the context in which power in society is exercised, it may be experienced as disempowering (Barnes and Prior, 1995). Choice and access to the decision-making process may be more empowering if it leads to changes in power relations in the organisation, but if limited to the point of service consumption it has little impact on empowering service users.

Structuralism and democratic empowerment

Lukes' (1974) seminal work, *Power: A Radical View*, critiques the pluralist concept of power, arguing that this approach merely reproduces the bias of the system it seeks to analyse. Lukes (1974) argues that pluralist approaches to power are too methodologically individualist and by focusing on individuals and their decisions in conflict situations we ignore the examination of how these needs and preferences are shaped in the first place. Lukes (1974) offers a 'third dimension of power' which he contends enables the examination of the structural nature of power by questioning how people come to make decisions and how potential issues may be kept off the agenda. This may or may not involve observable conflict and may involve latent conflict, which occurs when there is a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the *real interests* of those they exclude. However, the difficulty with this approach is this: how can one study what does not happen if people's *real interests* do not emerge? Lukes' suggestion that we should examine how people react to opportunities, or perceived opportunities, to escape from subordinate positions in hierarchical structures warrants examination. He argues we can take steps to find out what it is that people would have done otherwise. This approach would certainly be harder to test empirically than a behaviourist approach reporting observable behaviour. However, Lukes' (1974) third dimension allows for an exploration of the structural nature of power relations. This is in contrast to the pluralist approach whereby power is always an attribute of an identifiable agent (Heywood, 1994). Lukes' (1974) concept of power is more compatible with a democratic model of empowerment. The implications of Lukes' third dimension of power suggests that if service users are not aware of their real interests, simply creating greater opportunities for involvement in decision-making is not empowering. A democratic model of empowerment argues that, prior to service users exercising choice, a process of consciousness-raising is required (Starkey, 2003). This is similar to feminist understandings of power (Rowlands, 1995) which argue that we need to

understand the dynamics of oppression which may affect how individuals perceive themselves. A democratic model of empowerment is not just concerned with opening up decision-making but also the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that space. The process of empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions so people can see themselves as having the capacity to act and influence (Rowlands, 1995; Taylor, 1996). The democratic or liberational model of empowerment encourages a focus on people's lives within society as a whole and acknowledges that oppression operates at both personal and structural levels (Starkey, 2003). The importance of collective recognition of oppression is expressed and it is only with a collective recognition and struggle that collective empowerment can be said to exist (Oliver, 1996). In democratic empowerment models, a more holistic and collective approach to empowerment is adopted. Deakin (1996: 123) describes the model in this way:

> In order for users to exercise choice effectively they need to be able to function as citizens, that is, to be able to help influence not only their own circumstances but the overall pattern of collective choices.

The empowerment process is seen as requiring fundamental changes to organisational structures and power relations (Lewis, 2004).

The democratic model of empowerment is congruent with the structuralist view of power. A democratic approach to empowerment recognises the need for individuals and groups to realise their oppression and struggle against structural oppressive power relations. It is only once this 'capacity-building' (Evans, 2004) has been achieved that the model advocates measures to extend control over the organisation by increasing access to decision-making processes through tactics such as encouraging service users to sit on committees and governing bodies.

Foucault: power and discourse

Both the pluralist and the structuralist concepts of power share the same underlying concept of power according 'to which A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests' (Lukes, 1974: 27). Conversely, Foucault conceptualised power as being found in a range of networks of social relations. Foucault argued that any exercise of power is accompanied by associated discourses – some of which may be more dominant than others (Rabinow, 1991). This is similar to the view of power and discourse put forward by feminist theorist Catherine MacKinnon:

> Feminism distinctively as such comprehends that what counts as truth is produced in the interest of those with power to shape reality, and that this process is as pervasive as it is necessary as it is changeable (MacKinnon, 1993: 204).

When exploring power relations, Foucault poses the question: whom does the discourse serve? (Rabinow, 1991). Foucault contends that each society has its regime of truth – the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true. He conceived changing power relations as not a problem of changing people's consciousness but changing the regime of the production of truth (Rabinow, 1991). In empowerment terms, much of the public debate about empowerment takes place on the terms of and in the language of the dominant players in community care, policy-makers and those that hold resources (Lindow and Morris, 1995). It can be argued, therefore, that if service users were able to define the discourse surrounding service user empowerment more effectively this would in turn be experienced as empowering. For example, the disability movement redefined the dominant discourse around disability. Activists challenged the medical model of disability that had previously been accepted as true by medical practitioners and society more widely (Oliver, 1996; Starkey, 2003). The medical model of disability views people as having disabilities which are medical problems needing a cure. In contrast, the social model of disability views disabled people as having impairments and proposes that they are disabled by society because of inaccessible geographical, attitudinal and institutional barriers (Drake, 1994). Foucault's theory on power and discourse is valuable in highlighting the complexity of power relationships and the range of levels at which they may operate. His conception of power is a dynamic model and is appealing as it allows for the possibility of change (Starkey, 2003). However, by suggesting that power needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, Foucault neglects the more structural aspects of power which may be experienced as oppressive by more disempowered groups in society and may affect disproportionately their ability to become empowered (Starkey, 2003). A focus on 'power to' rather than 'power over' obscures the conflictual aspect of power. The fact that power is exercised *over* people 'disappears altogether from view. And along with it there disappears the central interest of studying power relations in the first place – an interest in the (attempted or successful) securing of people's compliance by overcoming or averting their opposition' (Lukes, 1974: 31). Oliver (1996: 50) similarly conceives power as a process of struggle and points to the 'irresolvable contradiction' between ideas of empowerment and care. He argues that 'people in need of care cannot be empowered because the reason they need care is precisely because they are powerless; if they were not, why would they need care?' (Oliver, 1996: 50). This suggests that a growth in power of an oppressed group results in the demise of power for the 'oppressors'. However, Foucault's approach views power as a relationship that is not inherently a zero sum concept and rejects the binary division of power (Humphries, 1994). In empowerment terms, a growth in empowerment for service users does not have to be seen as corresponding with a decline in

professionals' power. Service user empowerment can allow power to develop where it did not previously exist and where it is not at the expense of anyone else (Barnes and Walker, 1996). While this approach is appealing due to its dynamism and positive focus on people's abilities, it may disregard the structural barriers which prevent some service users exercising power.

Espoused theory and theories-in-use

This study aims to explore both the rhetoric and the reality of service user empowerment within a disability charity. This will be facilitated by an examination and comparison of the espoused theory *and* theories-in-use.

> When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives his allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory[.] (Argyris and Schön, 1974: 6-7).

This important distinction guides the investigation and the design of the case study.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on the issue of service user empowerment within a charity providing a range of services to disabled people. The study seeks to explore how empowerment is conceptualised, facilitated and achieved at different levels of the organisation – in policy documents, by senior managers, staff and service users. The study seeks to illuminate the differences between the espoused theory (the rhetoric) and the theories-in-use (the reality) (Argyris and Schön, 1974) of service user empowerment within the organisation. There may, of course, be competing rhetoric and multiple realities. The structure of this chapter draws on Kumar's (2001) chapter on methodology.

Research paradigm

A key concern of the investigation is to understand how different stakeholders within the organisation conceptualise empowerment. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is employed whereby the socially constructed nature of reality is stressed (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). This approach enables the researcher to unpack the different and contested meanings of empowerment within the organisation.

Research site

The research focuses on a disability charity, one of the UK's largest voluntary sector providers of services to disabled people (*Annual Review*, 2004). The charity provides services to over 21,000 disabled people in a variety of ways including: care at home services; residential care and nursing homes; day services; supported living; and education, training and employment support (*Annual Review*, 2004). For the research purposes, a single case study is the most appropriate form of enquiry. Case studies are helpful when real life contexts are being explored and they allow the 'investigation to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events' (Yin, 1994: 1). Furthermore, gaining an understanding of why or how things are gives the research more policy relevance and practical application (Kumar, 2001).

Method

A qualitative research method is considered the most effective approach as it allows the researcher to explore the meaning of empowerment for participants. A qualitative research design also enables the researcher to understand the particular context within which the participants act and any possible influence this may have on their actions (Maxwell, 1996). This is especially important in services for disabled people, which are frequently delivered and located separately from other services. Furthermore, a qualitative research design allows the researcher to explore the *process* by which events take place that is vital for any study of empowerment, as it is not an event but a process (Barnes and Walker, 1996; Rowlands, 1995; Starkey, 2003).

Data collection

Multiple sources of evidence were collated comprising of documentary analysis, interviews and direct observation. The practice of triangulation was observed in the belief that any findings or conclusion are likely to be more convincing and accurate if based on several different sources of information (Yin, 1994: 91). The theories behind the different concepts of power and models of empowerment discussed in the literature review were used as helpful theoretical propositions to guide data collection.

Interviews
In total twelve members of the organisation were interviewed: two senior managers, two operational managers, one operational staff member, one volunteer/service user, one trustee/service user and five service users. It was considered that twelve interviews would create enough data to analyse alongside other sources of evidence (Gaskell, 2000). When possible the researcher travelled to where the respondent either worked or accessed the

services. Ten out of the twelve interviews were conducted in person in the respondent's own environment and two were conducted by telephone. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. The researcher opened up the interview by asking the respondent what they understood by 'service user empowerment'. Follow up questions included asking how the respondent perceived the charity facilitated or constrained service user empowerment, and how they perceived the dynamic between staff and service user control. The interviews were left as open as possible to allow the researcher to get an insight into how the respondent constructed their reality and for greater credibility (Maxwell, 1996). Real life examples were asked for to gain an understanding of disempowerment or empowerment within the respondent's own context.

Documentary analysis

No single explicit policy document on service user empowerment existed in the organisation. Documentary analysis was drawn mainly from the *Annual Review* (2004) and the 10-year strategic vision for the organisation produced in 2005. These documents were analysed to explore the organisation's official strategy of service user empowerment. Yin (1994) warns not to consider these types of documents as containing the unmitigated truth. Rather, they are written for a specific purpose with a specific audience in mind. Comparing these types of documents with what various stakeholders within the organisation say allows an examination of how the reality compares to the rhetoric of service user empowerment.

Direct observation

Direct observations were also made when carrying out research including observing how staff and service users related to one another and the environments they occupied.

Data analysis

A framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) to data analysis was employed. This enabled the researcher to systematically sift through and sort the material according to key issues and themes.

Potential weaknesses

The possible weakness of relying on interviews for the majority of data carries a risk of bias due to poorly constructed questions (Yin, 1994). However, this risk is offset by the initial openness of the questions selected. A greater risk was posed by the respondents (both staff and service users) saying what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. To counter this the interviewer reiterated that all interviews were to remain anonymous and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions.

Research and empowerment

Qualitative research has been criticised by poststructuralists and postmodernists who argue that the researcher's gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, class and ethnicity and therefore there can be no objective observations (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Similarly, research methodologies have been criticised by feminists and black sociologists who highlight the inherent unequal power dimensions within the research process (Humphries, 1994). This study sought to reduce these risks by ensuring individuals' accounts of their experience were a major source of data. Furthermore, professionals' accounts were not privileged over those of service users - service users made up the biggest group of respondents collectively. Opie (1992) suggests that allowing many contradictory voices to speak can reduce the appropriation of the data to the researcher's interests. The researcher was mindful both at the interview and analysis stage not to give more prominence to one particular type of view.

Summary of key research findings

- No single concept or definition of service user empowerment was identified. The term encompassed common themes such as valuing the individual, achievement of aspirations and 'having a voice'.

- Service user *empowerment* was often conflated with service user *involvement* and this involvement was often restricted to the point of service delivery.

- The issue of 'choice' is complex, especially when users may not have had the experience of exercising choice previously. Extending choice does not necessarily facilitate empowerment.

- The organisation pursues both democratic and consumerist strategies with an objective of facilitating service user empowerment. Democratic empowerment strategies such as consciousness-raising, collective support through forums and meetings, and peer support are a necessary part of the empowerment process before consumerist empowerment strategies can be meaningful.

- The majority of operational staff and service users saw power as expandable and perceived a mutually supportive partnership between the two groups.

- Users expressed a sense of disconnect from the Board of Trustees and central office which is reflected in the fact that user involvement in the strategic control of the organisation was severely limited.

- Evidence was found to support Oliver's (1996) assertion that 'care' and 'empowerment' are contradictory concepts which create inherent tensions.

4. Discussion

This chapter discusses the research findings in more detail and tentative explanations for the findings are proposed.

To ensure the research is as empowering to respondents as possible, key points are illustrated with quotes from individuals to enable them to speak for themselves. M1 and M2 denote senior managers, OM1 and OM2 denote operational managers, S1 denotes operational staff, V+SU1 denotes a volunteer who is also a service user and SU1-6 denotes the six service users interviewed.

How is service user empowerment conceptualised?

No single definition of service user empowerment is provided in the organisation's policy. Service user empowerment was conceptualised in different ways by managers, staff and service users with a number of common themes emerging.

Focus on the individual

Most managers and service users conceptualised empowerment as an individual process and therefore the ways of enabling or achieving empowerment would be different for each individual.

It's different for different types of people that we are providing services to (M2).

Empowerment from an individual's perspective is purely individual and so what you would need, to achieve what you wanted to do, might be completely different to what I would want (OM2).

There was, however, recognition by one volunteer/service user that empowerment may come from a sense of being part of a collective.

I suppose the biggest empowerment comes from actually attending here because a lot of disabled people they hide away . . . coming here they think 'I feel empowered

already when I got here because I've made a step from hiding back behind my disability'. That's a big empowerment (V+SU1).

Empowerment was understood to be a reflexive concept where the only people that could empower the service users were the service users themselves.

The only people that can actually empower themselves are the individuals. So often our job is just about encouraging people and helping them to gain the confidence to be able to take control of their lives and speak up (M2).

Staff and managers saw their role as assisting empowerment by providing resources or encouragement but in the end it was up to the service user whether they wanted to be empowered.

Taking control

Service user empowerment was often conceptualised by managers and service users as users taking control of their own lives both within and outside of the services provided by the organisation.

It's about enabling the people that we are providing a service to in whatever form that takes, actually being able to take control of their own lives and do things in the way that they would want to do it, if you like, were it not for their disability (M2).

Achievement of aspirations

Service user empowerment was also perceived as service users being able to achieve their aspirations.

My role in empowerment would be to find the resources and the means to provide any service user with what they wanted to do or achieve (OM2).

The organisation works on the values that there are no limitations for service users when they come here. So I empower them to try something new – to abolish the limitations within their life and set new goals for themselves when they come here to the centre (V+SU1).

Having a voice

The majority of service users conceptualised empowerment in terms of 'having a say' about both how the service they received was delivered and also in wider society.

> *Well the word empowerment should mean that we have a say in the way the home is run (SU3).*

> *It [empowerment] means for the residents to have a say and to be heard and to put our point over (SU5).*

> *Just say what you feel, your opinion. But whether it will get taken any further you can't say (SU4).*

> *Empowerment means having a say in society (SU2).*

The above concepts of empowerment with a focus on the individual and their ability to influence service provision suggest that power and empowerment are initially understood in pluralist and subsequently consumerist terms. However, on further examination, issues such as 'having a say' are linked to the ability to make choices that affect your life. The ability to exercise choice is a complex issue involving related concepts such as confidence and capacity-building. These issues are discussed in the next section.

The issue of 'choice'

Both service users and managers saw exercising choice as central to the empowerment process.

> *[Empowerment] is about that individual choice . . . So the journey for me would be about the decisions I make that I wanted to make at that particular time, the direction I wanted to go (OM2).*

> *It's definitely about choice. About having a future. If you can look beyond that brick wall. That's when you are empowered or you are on the way (S1).*

> *Empowerment means having a choice to be able to live as similar life as to somebody that doesn't have a disability (SU6).*

Choice and responsibility

When managers talked about choice they often coupled it with the idea that it entailed certain responsibilities and consequences that the service user needed to recognise if choice was to be exercised effectively. For example, one manager had, at the request of one of his service users, arranged for him to go on a trip to Amsterdam to visit a sex worker.

> *I said, 'I'll sort it for you but you have some responsibility. You need to get yourself off down to that clinic and find out how to put a condom on. You need to find out about the implications of having safe and unsafe sex' (OM1).*

Choice was seen as empowering when users were aware of the full implications and consequences of any particular choice.

Why choice can be problematic

The idea of individual service users being able to exercise choice and therefore be empowered was recognised by two managers as problematic. This was due to the fact that users may not have had the opportunity to exercise choice previously and, as a result, 'could not see' (OM1) what choice meant.

> *And I think with this service it's very interesting because it was taken over from the council five years ago and when we first came here these people found it extremely hard to express a choice or preference in anything and they really found it quite frightening because for the first time the charity came in here to run the service and said, 'Well how do you want this done?' (M2).*

> *You know it was as simple as the tea trolley would go round twice a day and everybody would get tea, whether they liked it or not everybody got tea and there was sugar in the tea as well so it was irrelevant as to whether you had sugar in your tea or not. And I remember once saying to one of the users, 'Would you like a coffee?' And she said, 'No, I want the tea'. And I said, 'But do you ever drink coffee?' 'Not for a long time'. I said, 'Well wouldn't you like to try a coffee?' So I think I try to encourage people to try alternatives before you make your choice (OM1).*

These examples suggest that simply extending choice, as suggested in a consumerist model of empowerment, as a mechanism for service user empowerment is not effective. Before service users exercise choice, they may need to build up capacity and confidence, as recognised in the

democratic model of empowerment. The organisation engages in a democratic model of empowerment through a forum for disabled service users.

Capacity-building

Low confidence and low aspirations as a barrier to empowerment are recognised by both staff and service users. One manager spoke of service users' 'fears, phobias and fantasies' (OM2) as the main barrier to participation. The principal way the organisation addresses these issues is through a Forum which is open to all the organisation's service users and aims to 'empower service users to become more involved and feel confident in taking part in various activities if they choose' (Policy Document, 2003*).* The organisation states, 'The Forum, conceived 6 years ago, has been highly successful and we are looking for new ways to build on its achievements*' (*Annual Review, 2004). This assertion is supported by the fact that the Forum's budget has increased from £647,000 for 2002/3 to £748,000 for 2003/4 - an increase of 15.6%. However, the Forum only accounts for 0.5% of the total expenditure for 2003/4 (Annual Review, 2004) – a relatively small share.

The Forum places an emphasis on service users gaining the skills and confidence to be able to participate effectively. 'The Forum makes them [service users] much more effective in their involvement. They don't just go to a meeting and not speak up' (M1). This claim is supported by service users' experiences with one service user commenting, 'I mean ten years ago I would have been too scared to speak but now I just shout – I just say what I want to say you know?' (SU3). The Forum employs a number of strategies to enable service user empowerment which follow the democratic model of empowerment: training on the social model of disability which involves consciousness-raising about the barriers society imposes on disabled people; creating opportunities for service users to meet together and share experiences which provides an opportunity for peer support and collective empowerment; and mentoring provided by a team of disabled staff. One service user related her experience of the training provided by the Forum:

> *I think you learnt at that training that you didn't have to put up with it you know. That you were able to speak and you were a free person and you were still able to make you know …… you can still make decisions. Just because you've become disabled it doesn't mean you have to put up with all the crap that goes around it. It really does shine through in a big way (SU3).*

The training explicitly involves redefining the discourse around disability, supporting Foucault's view that any exercise of power is accompanied by associated discourses, some of which are more dominant than others (Rabinow, 1991). This method also supports Lukes' structural view of power that people's *real* interests may in fact be hidden by social structures.

> *Often when you get groups of disabled people together they haven't heard of that [the*
> *social model of disability] before. They think it's their fault that they're disabled and it's*
> *their problem. And if you can get people to understand that they are entitled to the*
> *same life as anyone else and if society removes the barriers………. Then they do grow*
> *in confidence with that and realise it's not their problem (M1).*

The value of service users coming together as a collective to realise and define their own interests and draw strength from one another is recognised and prioritised with regular forums arranged for this purpose. Similarly, mentors employed by the Forum for assisting service users with a variety of concerns or activities are drawn from the disability movement demonstrating a model of peer support favoured by democratic empowerment models. However, the organisation works with over 21,000 service users (Annual Review, 2004) and only 364 service users attended training in 2004, which suggests that the impact of the Forum within the organisation is far from universal at the present time.

Staff and service users relations

Power as a finite concept

A small number of service users and managers saw power as a finite concept and thus conceptualised an increase in service user control as corresponding with a decrease in staff's control.

> *The more we enable people the more the people who service the homes, the less say*
> *they will have really. There will automatically be less control [for staff] (SU6).*

One manager also acknowledged, 'I might not want a user to be in more control than I would be in' (OM1) suggesting an increase in service user empowerment could be viewed as threatening by staff.

Power as expandable

However, the majority of both staff and service users did not see an increase of service user empowerment corresponding with a decrease of staff power. This supports Barnes and Walker's (1996) assertion that empowerment should not be viewed as a zero sum game.

> *I don't see it as just this amount of power which is closely defined and we need to support the users to take it off the others. I see it as users learning to feel powerful and seize opportunities (M1).*

Service users also recognised operational staff did not occupy powerful positions within the organisation.

> *You can see that at certain times they [staff] are really struggling and ……. for instance on Saturday nights there are very few staff and you try and help out if you can but it's good the relationship – we're all human and we try to help them and they try to help us (SU4).*

> *We've got some very good staff and I think they are as frustrated as what we are at times (SU3).*

A number of service users regarded staff as allies who are struggling to deliver a high standard of service in difficult circumstances. Relations between operational staff and service users were frequently seen as involving a partnership involving two equal parties. Central to this relationship is the concept of dialogue leading to understanding between the two parties.

> *When you put things in different ways and they put things in different ways then you realise that we all need each other and we all support each other as best we can (SU3).*

> *We're lucky to have the staff that we've got - if there's one thing that you mustn't have in places like this it is a 'them and us' issue. We work as a team (SU2).*

Empowerment as dialectic

One manager saw service user empowerment as a dialectic process with an increase in service user empowerment facilitating an increase in staff empowerment.

> *I think in some ways for many staff there's much more empowerment for themselves individually in their jobs if they feel that that's what they're supporting people to achieve. So although they might give up small bits of power that empowering feeling is more satisfying for them in their jobs (M1).*

The dialectic nature of empowerment was also touched on by a member of staff when observing the interaction between a service user and a volunteer who was suffering from depression.

> *So sometimes this person [a volunteer] who is quite needy can bring out something in*
> *a disabled person who may feel very low in themselves . . . So in his own way he's*
> *helping them and they in turn are helping him. It isn't all about 'helping' disabled*
> *people this empowerment, it's got to go back and forward (S1).*

The dialectic dynamic described above supports the Foucauldian rejection of the binary nature of power. It suggests that if staff are not threatened by service user empowerment they can facilitate this process and themselves become more empowered as a result.

Non-hierarchical structures aiding empowerment

Both operational managers talked about having a 'non-hierarchical style' to their management which fostered service user and staff empowerment.

> *I have an open door policy – my door will stay open and people can come in and chat*
> *about anything and I think that's very important. If I didn't have that I wouldn't see that*
> *there's any point in continuing because there would not be that connection (OM2).*

As well as a non-hierarchical structure, a fluidity of roles facilitated service user empowerment. For example, a volunteer who was also a service user talked about 'being a lead for them [service users] to follow' (V+SU1). The same volunteer also thought that sometimes service users would come to him rather than members of staff due to the fact that he was disabled himself.

> *As a volunteer I hope that ……..because I have disabilities myself I can understand*
> *how they [service users] feel . . . I can understand the barriers you have to break down*
> *to get somewhere in enabling yourself in life (V+SU1).*

This less hierarchical structure and duality of roles is a feature that is more common among VSOs than other types of organisations (Billis and Glennerster, 1998) and may provide an extra dimension that VSOs can offer in service user empowerment.

Accountability to Service Users

The organisation does not have a specific service user empowerment policy although a number of service user involvement strategies are widely used. There were divergent views amongst both managers and service users over accountability to service users and who the organisation 'belonged' to. Both operational managers spoke of service users as being their priority.

> *My personal view is that service users are my number one - that if they weren't there we wouldn't have a service (OM2).*

> *I think empowerment means ensuring, for me, that service users within my service are acutely aware that this is their service and it's not mine (OM1).*

These statements suggest that service users should feel some kind of 'ownership' of the service. However, one service user's views directly contradicted this sense.

> *I mean with charity work people make a good living out of disabled people and I feel that they [staff] ought to realise more who they are actually working for and what they are providing (SU4).*

Lack of a specific service user empowerment policy means that individual managers had a great deal of influence over how much and what kind of service user empowerment took place within their service as one manager recognised: 'I think often managers forget to involve people almost by mistake - it just doesn't become part of their thinking so they tend to exclude them' (M1). This may lead to regional variation over service user empowerment: 'there are nine other regions so whatever happens here may not happen in other regions . . . it depends on who your regional directors or service managers are in terms of how they are going to implement that direction really' (OM2). There was recognition by one manager that a formal policy would make the organisation 'more accountable' (M1) to its users. Regional variation illustrates how staff retain ultimate control of the empowerment agenda by deciding what empowerment strategies (if any) to follow.

Different methods of service user involvement

Within the organisation the issue of service user empowerment is often conflated with service user involvement and participation. However, not all participation automatically leads to empowerment (Drake and Owen, 1991). The principal ways the majority of service users are given the opportunity to participate can be divided into four areas: through Service User Committees; policy consultation; quality evaluation of services; and the recruitment of staff.

These strategies are congruent with the consumerist models of empowerment where 'empowered' consumers are able to express preferences and make choices about services they receive (Robson et al., 1997).

Service User Committees

Every service provided by the organisation, whether it is a day service or a residential home, has a service user committee which meets once a month to discuss issues around service delivery. To ensure independence, these meetings are usually held in the absence of managers with a volunteer taking the minutes. Frequently, the service manager is called in to answer questions on a particular point or to provide an explanation of how a particular decision was made.

The general perception of both managers and service users was that service user committees did have influence over service delivery. The service users tended to view the committees as a valuable tool in creating a dialogue with management.

> *We have formed our own residents committee so that we're a voice and it gives us the power . . . to say I disagree with what's being said and put forward our point of view (SU4).*

> *We are listened to . . . someone always takes notes and it's passed on (SU5).*

One manager looked at his service user committee as working 'alongside me to manage the service' and 'sharing responsibility' (OM1).

Specific changes to service delivery in a number of services were made as a result of the committees' intervention and a number of service users spoke about how the food offered by the organisation had changed as a result of the influence of the service user committees. However, a number of service users saw inherent limitations in the committees including a lack of willingness or ability from some users to get involved.

> *They [service users] are given the opportunity but they're not bothered. You know you've got to make their mind up for them . . . they can't be bothered, they're not interested and if you say suggest something they just go 'Yeah' (SU5).*

One service user also noted the lack of influence the service user committee may have over bigger issues such as staffing numbers.

> *Each month we have a committee meeting and we can ask questions and get things changed but it doesn't always happen like that . . . as much as they try to resolve things you can't always resolve them because if you haven't got enough staff to work with that's not down to the organisation, that's down to the fact that they are not paid enough (SU3).*

Service user committees are effective in creating a channel of communication between users and staff and allowing a forum where issues over service delivery can be discussed, questioned and influenced by users. The type of issues that come up such as food and social events do impact hugely on the users' experience of the service. However, the issues are limited to the service users' experience of the service at the point of consumption and do not involve more strategically orientated policies. This may limit the impact on service user empowerment if fundamental power relations within the organisation remain unchanged (Drake and Owens, 1991).

The local service users committees are mirrored on a national level by a service user executive. The executive is made up of 20 service users from across the country and is 'principally concerned with the policies and governance issues of the organisation' (Policy Document). The Chair of this executive has a seat on the Board of Trustees providing a link between service users, the Board of Trustees and Central Office.

> *It's basically looking at policies and deciding what's right and what's wrong. We're hoping to be involved in policy-making but it doesn't always happen. We do have a lot of clout but it's obviously a slow haul and it always will be (SU3).*

This comment suggests that involvement is limited to the consultation stage of policy-making which can also negatively impact service user empowerment.

Policy consultation

The organisation consults service users on a range of policies with one manager asserting that consultation takes place 'on all policies that are important' (M1). Facilitators from the Forum run meetings every three months within their region where consultation takes place and any service user can attend if they wish to do so. One of the challenges set out in the organisation's strategic plan is 'to develop new and better services as identified by disabled people'. A major mechanism for this is consultation. There is evidence that service users influence policies through consultation. For example, following consultation with users a major transport policy put forward by the organisation has recently been changed. A policy change on the procedure for reporting criminal offences in residential homes also resulted after consultation with users.

However, one service user thought that some consultation was 'paying lip service' (SU3) to service users and that frequently no real change occurred.

> *I mean we've all got volunteer coordinators now and they are supposed to listen to the*
> *service user so the service users make some suggestion and they say 'Oh yes that's*
> *very good blah de blah de blah' and then you go back to them and then they say 'Well*
> *maybe if we put it to the budget next year and maybe we can get this done later'.*
> *Which is basically moving the goalposts (SU3).*

This remark illustrates the feelings of disempowerment which may result from consultation when fundamental power relations remain unchanged.   Restricting users to the consultation stage means users have less influence in defining the discourse and setting the agenda. This finding is overlooked if analysing the situation with a pluralist concept of power.

Quality evaluation of services

Service users have the opportunity to be involved with the quality evaluation of services delivered by the organisation and training on this topic is provided by the organisation. Service users are involved in both local and national evaluations of services. In the 'Care and Operational Visits' described by a service user involved in quality evaluation, a letter is sent to every service user asking them for feedback on the service. The service user saw the evaluation process as essential for 'weeding out' (SU6) staff that were institutional - for example, those members of staff that were less responsive to service users' needs and preferences. The evaluation process was also considered by the interviewee to act as a 'barometer' for how service users felt about the services they received. Service users are also involved in site inspections which take place every month and last about two hours. As a result of these visits, changes may be made to service delivery.

> *We have trained people that go in and there's set criteria and will comment on the*
> *quality of the service, they'll talk to service users and staff and then as a result of what*
> *comes out of that there may be actions that the manager needs to take (M2).*

As a result of one of these reviews, it became a requirement for service users to be on interview panels so they were involved with the recruitment of staff.

Recruitment of staff

Service users are involved in the recruitment of staff in the organisation. Training is provided for service users on selecting staff; the organisation's guidelines state that at least one service user should be on the interview panel for all members of staff and one manager said this was commonplace with 'senior management' (M1). However, service users are not involved in the whole recruitment process – for example, the creation of job descriptions and specifications and short-listing of candidates. 'We don't get involved in the whole process, that seems to be management. They only bring us in when they've done their short-listing really' (SU4).

The four different types of service user participation demonstrate that the organisation offers a range and variety of opportunities for service users to get involved in influencing the organisation. However, participation is often focused at the end stages of procedures and this may negatively impact on the sense of empowerment service users feel. The methods of participation described above, in contrast to the Forum, follow the consumerist model of empowerment. There is certainly a place for this type of service user influence as issues such as food and transport are crucially important for service users and do affect quality of life to a significant degree. However, an overly individualistic emphasis may deflect attention from oppressive social structures and power relations in society (Starkey, 2003). As Lukes (1974) warns, by focusing on individuals and their decisions in conflict situations, we may ignore examining how those needs and preferences are shaped in the first place. We cannot assume that consumerist empowerment strategies alone are empowering for service users.

Lack of strategic control

Although the organisation has a number of mechanisms for service user involvement and states, 'We are seeking further to enhance the involvement of service users in every aspect of our work' (Annual Review, 2004), involvement is often restricted to the point of service consumption. A number of service users and managers expressed the view that users had little influence over strategic decisions. Service users' sense of disempowerment in this respect is reflected in the disconnection many users expressed from both the Board of Trustees and the central office in London – essentially the power base of the organisation. It is further demonstrated in the lack of service user involvement in policy formulation (as opposed to consultation) with particular reference to the organisation's recently designed strategic vision for the next ten years.

Trustees and central office

Both operational managers and service users saw the lack of a link between service users and the Board of Trustees and the central office of the organisation based in London.

> *(Interviewer) You gave some examples of how service users have influenced the services that you deliver. Do you feel like service users have any influence at Trustee or head office level?*
> *Operational manager: No, in my personal view they don't.*
> *(Interviewer) Do you see that as problematic?*
> *Operational manager: Yes, I do. It's something that everyone will say quite openly* (OM2).

> *We sometimes feel that there is this vision of people living in an ivory tower in London and are a bit disconnected with us. I think that can very easily become the feeling of service users (SU6).*

Central office was regarded as out of touch and non-representative of users. This point is illustrated by the fact that, due to a fire regulation at the central office, only six wheelchair users can attend the offices at any one time, which one manager described as 'a bit embarrassing' (M1). However, there was a sense that this had been recognised and that there were attempts to address it through an advertising campaign to attract a more diversified Board of Trustees.

> *So at last, I think they are realising that a load of old men, however well intentioned . . . it's better to have people who really know what they are talking about first hand (SU6).*

The feeling of division that service users expressed about central office and the Board of Trustees was in direct contrast to feelings expressed about their own services. This is indicative of how service users may have influence at a local service delivery level but little or no influence at more senior levels.

Strategic Planning

The organisation has recently written a strategic plan, which 'is about the future of the organisation – the vision that we have, the values that we share and the goals we are working towards'. The document was written by a working group of senior managers with the Director of Communications taking the lead. The document sets out the organisation's broad agenda and vision for the next ten years and yet no service users were involved in the creation of the document. The document was only rolled out to the regions and service users after it had been

written. A number of service users spoke about feeling annoyed and disenfranchised that they had not been involved in such an important document at the beginning stages.

> *They talked about the rights of disability but they'd not asked us what we want. It was very clear that they didn't have a disabled person on that strategy and I think that was really bad and I don't know what they were frightened of but I feel like there's some kind of fear, to a degree. So I think there is a reluctance and the reality is the experts are the ones that are disabled and why not come to us and just ask us (SU3).*

A senior manager conceded that there 'was a feeling of annoyance that an organisation providing services to disabled people didn't have disabled people involved with doing it . . . . It felt like quite a backwards step in terms of involvement' (M1). The lack of service user involvement at the beginning stages supports one manager's view that, 'service users are consulted about policies and procedure but ultimately I don't think they have any bearing on any ………. on the true direction of the service' (OM2). However, one service user thought that 'they have learnt lessons from this and the next time they want to roll something out they've heard what service users have to say and they would involve us from the start' (SU6).

Service user empowerment requires a fundamental shake up of power relations within an organisation (Goss and Miller, 1995) and service users are unlikely to feel empowered if they are unable to influence strategic decision-making (Barnes and Prior, 1995). The lack of influence or control which users have at the senior levels of the organisation suggests that users' empowerment is limited.

Structural barriers to empowerment

The problem with 'care'

A number of service users and staff recognised that either being in a residential home or accessing day services was not a 'normal' situation for adults.

> *I mean when you think about it is it normal for adults to come into a centre like this just because they have a commonality of a disability? (M2)*

In fact, one member of staff even joked that if a service user was really empowered 'they probably wouldn't be here' (S1). One manager talked about, 'acknowledging that society has created some dependency meeting the needs of those people and it's not their fault that society has created this dependency through the use of day services . . . .' (OM2). This dependency at

times seems contradictory to the empowerment which the organisation professes to enable service users to achieve. One service user gave a very practical example:

> *I think that the organisation are probably doing their best to get this sorted but you cannot have a home of 44 people running totally empowered because you can't it's not possible. If everyone decided they wanted a bath at nine o'clock in the morning it's impossible (SU3).*

This comment illustrates that the organisation can only go so far with empowerment before being limited by the dependencies that the model of care imposes on the individual. These limitations support Oliver's (1996) assertion that 'care' and 'empowerment' involve irresolvable contradictions. Achieving empowerment will require larger changes in society and how disabled people's needs are met. This agenda is supported by the organisation through its campaigning work and the organisation states in its 10-year vision that its goal for the future is 'to be known globally for changing society's responses to disability'.

Another service user spoke of having to use his wheelchair more frequently when he went to live in one of the organisation's homes because of the rules about health and safety that the organisation had to adhere to.

> *They didn't want disabled people trying to go to the loo by themselves and because people became the care of the Social Worker or the Care Manager as soon as you come into care you become their property it seems. People [staff] have got to be very careful of what they are doing and in that sense that hasn't helped the disabled people to become empowered. It's a fine line between the two really (SU4).*

Providing more services in the home of the disabled person may help to alleviate this tension between 'care' and 'empowerment'. A senior manager recognised that care provided in the home was the direction that social policy was going and that buying in support to have at home 'is a major step forward in enabling people to live their lives the way they want to live them – it has to be more normal' (M2). Supporting people in their own homes is the largest service delivered by the organisation (Annual Review, 2004) and within the current social policy climate looks likely to carry on expanding. A focus on rights as opposed to care will ultimately be more empowering for service users. The organisation's policy agenda for 2005 is couched in terms of enabling disabled people to achieve civil rights and the organisation's campaigning is aimed at achieving 'a fully inclusive society in which there are no barriers to disabled people's participation in any aspect of life'. The paradox between care and empowerment is an issue that the organisation is addressing through campaigning but it will also require major changes in society.

Disability and poverty

A number of service users also spoke about feeling disempowered by the lack of financial resources they had. A number of service users were in receipt of Income Support, which left them £17.50 a week to live off. This amount had to be supplemented by their Mobility Allowance which then meant service users were unable to use those funds to get out as much as they would like. A lack of access to financial resources means that any exercise of choice is made within severely limited circumstances. This has significant consequences for the level of empowerment an individual is able to achieve and again points to a rights based model of empowerment based on civil rights in society as ultimately more empowering.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine the difference between the rhetoric and reality of service user empowerment in a disability voluntary sector organisation. This involved an exploration of how service user empowerment was conceptualised in policy documents and by different stakeholders within the organisation. The research also looked at the dynamic between staff, service users and empowerment and the different strategies the organisation employed to facilitate service user empowerment.

No dominant concept of service user empowerment was identified although common themes such as 'having a voice' and 'taking control' frequently came up. Lack of theoretical and operational clarity led to 'service user involvement' being conflated with 'service user empowerment'. However, not all involvement can be seen as empowering (Evans, 2004). The 'fuzziness' surrounding service user empowerment suggests a clear definition and strategy would be beneficial and give the concept more validity.

The research findings support the view that there are substantial limitations to the pluralist conception of power and the related consumerist empowerment model. The complexities discussed around the issue of choice suggest that the structural power dynamics of who is shaping those choices are not considered in the pluralist view of power. This has significant policy implications for the most effective empowerment strategies. Taylor's (1996) view that consumerist strategies do not transfer well into VSOs gains support. Organisations working with disempowered client groups need to pursue a more democratic model of empowerment before consumerist methods are embarked upon. This may, however, be at odds with the trend in the voluntary sector towards commercialisation. Deakin (1996) observes that the contract culture has potential benefits for users as customers but any benefits for users as citizens is yet

to be realised. Further research on the impact of the contract culture on service user empowerment is required.

The fact that service users have little involvement with the strategic control of the organisation raises implications for the validity of traditional disability charities' claim to be the voice of disabled people. This raises questions around the Government's agenda for user involvement and indicates that Government should also be looking to fund user-controlled disability organisations if they are looking to pursue authentic user empowerment.

The findings on how staff and service users viewed their relationship suggest that a binary view of power may be too simplistic to characterise this dynamic. The fact that a majority of staff and service users viewed their relationship as a partnership supports a more Foucauldian view of power. This suggests that as long as users are in control of the empowerment process, staff can facilitate this and in turn become more empowered. However, it may be difficult for users to be in control of the empowerment process if they are so underrepresented at senior levels of the organisation.

Lastly, Oliver's (1996) assertion that care and empowerment are contradictory concepts gains support. Enabling disabled people to become empowered will require huge changes in how collectively society and public services meet these needs. A re-framing of the issue in terms of social inclusion and civil rights is necessary. This particular organisation is pursuing this agenda in their campaigning work and service users will need to be at the forefront of this work for it to be meaningful and empowering.

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