Power and Empowerment

Neil Thompson

Theory into Practice
Series Editor Neil Thompson

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The Theory into Practice Series

This exciting new series fills a significant gap in the market for short, user-friendly texts, written by experts, that succinctly introduce sets of theoretical ideas, relate them clearly to practice issues, and guide the reader to further learning. They particularly address discrimination, oppression, equality and diversity. They can be read either as general overviews of particular areas of theory and practice, or as foundations for further study. The series will be invaluable across the human services, including social work and social care; youth and community work; criminal and community justice work; counselling; advice work; housing; and aspects of health care.

About the Series Editor

Neil Thompson is a Director of Avenue Consulting Ltd (www.avenueconsulting.co.uk), a company offering training and consultancy in relation to social work and human relations issues. He is also Professor of Social Work and Well-being at Liverpool Hope University. He has over 100 publications to his name, including best-selling textbooks, papers in scholarly journals and training and open learning materials.

Neil is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Institute of Training and Occupational Learning and the Royal Society of Arts (elected on the basis of his contribution to organisational learning). He was the founding editor of the British Journal of Occupational Learning (www.traininginstitute.co.uk). He was also responsible for the setting up of the self-help website, www.humansolutions.org.uk and the Social Well-being blog: http://socialwell-being.blogspot.com. His personal website is at www.neilthompson.info.
Series Editor’s Foreword

About the series

The relationship between theory and practice is one that has puzzled practitioners and theorists alike for some considerable time, and there still remains considerable debate about how the two interconnect. However, what is clear is that it is dangerous to tackle the complex problems encountered in ‘people work’ without having at least a basic understanding of what makes people tick, of how the social context plays a part in both the problems we address and the solutions we seek. Working with people and their problems is difficult and demanding work. To try to undertake it without being armed with a sound professional knowledge base is a very risky strategy indeed, and potentially a disastrous one.

An approach to practice based mainly on guesswork, untested assumptions, habit and copying others is clearly not one that can be supported. Good practice must be an informed practice, with actions based, as far as possible, on reasoning, understanding and evidence. This series is intended to develop just such good practice by providing:

- an introductory overview of a particular area of theory or professional knowledge;
- an exploration of how it relates to practice issues;
- a consideration of how the theory base can help tackle discrimination and oppression; and
- a guide to further learning.

The texts in the series are written by people with extensive knowledge and practical experience in the fields concerned and are intended as an introduction to the wider and more in-depth literature base.

About this book

This particular text, with its focus on power and empowerment, provides an important discussion of some highly significant issues that have a broad application across a wide variety of work settings that involve dealing with people and their problems. It is concerned with two inter-related topics, and both are unfortunately very prone to oversimplification. Given that this is a short, introductory textbook, it is very important to make sure that it does not add to the tendency to oversimplify. The book’s aims must therefore be quite modest. No author could possibly say all there is to say about power in a single book, even if it were a huge tome, and so this short book must limit itself to providing an
introductory overview of some of the main theoretical issues (Part One); exploring some of the practice implications (Part Two); identifying important issues relating to tackling discrimination and oppression (Part Three); and providing suggestions for further learning (Part Four).

It is to be hoped that the book will (i) provide a helpful introduction to some of the complexities of this subject area; (ii) establish the dangers of neglecting or oversimplifying the issues involved; (iii) provide some insights about how power and empowerment can and should be managed in practice; (iv) establish a platform for future debate, study and learning; and (v) instil a degree of enthusiasm for developing a broader and deeper understanding of power, empowerment and related matters.

Neil Thompson, Series Editor
About the author

Neil Thompson is an independent consultant, trainer and author with Avenue Consulting Ltd and Professor of Social Work and Well-being at Liverpool Hope University. His interests include equality and diversity; workplace well-being; loss and grief; and workplace learning. He is a well-published author and his recent books include People Problems (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006a) and Promoting Workplace Learning (The Policy Press, 2006b).

Neil has a long-standing commitment to promoting equality and social justice. This book is the result of, and a contribution to, that commitment.

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Introduction

Morriss (2002, p. 1) sets the scene nicely for this book when he argues that:

The meaning of the word ‘power’ seems like a will-o’-the-wisp: it tends to dissolve entirely whenever we look at it closely. We are sure that we meant something by the word, and have a vague idea what it is: but this understanding tends to fade away upon examination, until ‘power’ seems nothing more than ‘a giant glob of oily ambiguity’ (Dahl, 1957b: p. 1056).

Of course, power is much more than a ‘giant glob of oily ambiguity’, but the point is well made that it is not an easy concept to pin down. Indeed, it is one that we need to wrestle with, rather than something that can be easily defined and neatly ‘packaged’. When we come to the related concept of empowerment, we find an equally tricky concept and another one that does not lend itself to a simple treatment. Indeed, as we shall see, both power and empowerment are concepts that have been dogged by a very strong tendency to oversimplification (or, to use the technical term, ‘reductionism’). The complex, multi-level nature of both has tended to be reduced to the dangerously distorted level of ‘sound bites’ – leading to not only a great deal of confusion, but also a certain amount of ill-feeling, as many people have been alienated by clumsy, unsophisticated and simplistic approaches that can do more harm than good. A key aim of this book, then, is to paint a picture of how complex the territory is and to provide some degree of guidance on how to navigate it.

Like other books in the Theory into Practice series, this text is divided into four parts. In Part One I provide a discussion first of the theory base relating to power and then the theory base relating to empowerment. Part Two builds on this by exploring some of the practice implications of both power and empowerment. Part Three links our two key concepts to various aspects of discrimination and provides a basis for promoting equality and valuing diversity. Part Four is a ‘guide to further learning’ and includes suggestions for further reading and details of relevant organisations and websites.

To provide an overview of the theory base relating to power and empowerment and link it to practice in general and anti-discriminatory practice in particular in one short text is clearly an ambitious undertaking. However, what makes it a realistic undertaking is that it is a matter of producing a ‘gateway’ text – that is, one that provides just enough information to lay a foundation for further study and learning. This book, then, should not be seen as a complete learning experience
in its own right, but, rather, as the beginning of a longer and broader learning process that should allow you to develop your understanding further.

The subject matter of this book is both highly complex and very important. It is therefore doubly important that you should see what is offered here as part of a wider whole, rather than a finished product in its own right: (i) to do justice to the complexities involved; and (ii) to recognise how significant both power and empowerment are in any form of ‘people work’ – that is, occupations that are involved in working with people and helping them tackle the problems they encounter.

I hope you will find that what is offered in the pages that follow is informative, stimulating and helpful. It is not intended to provide all the answers, but it should provide you with a foundation from which to continue learning, so that you can develop your own answers to each of the challenges that power and empowerment will continue to cast before us.

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