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Title: Discerning Actual levels Of Substantive Empowerment

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Discerning Actual Levels Of Substantive Empowerment

There is often a desire upon the part of people involved in services to take steps to ensure that the recipients of services are “empowered”. Being able to translate this into practical action, that makes a difference at the level of substance, is often more difficult than many might expect. This is because there is often a lack of precision as to what something like “empowerment” should mean. This is why it is helpful to start with measures of empowerment that are relatively straightforward.

One way to achieve this is to start with the simple test of whether a person who is assisted by services is actually being enabled to make a significant difference, *through their own actions*, on the character of the service they are receiving. More precisely, of the many important decisions taken that result in the actual design and operation of the services they ultimately receive, how many of these were made *by the person*, and how many were made *by others, on behalf of the person*.

In order to evaluate this question, one would need to be able to identify what the major decisions are that most affect the actual substance of what the person ultimately receives i.e. their service. For instance, given that staff account for as much as 85 % of the total costs of service, the degree to which a given service user has decisive “say so” over who are the staff that enter their life in service roles, might be one of these “key” decisions that should be focused on. By paying a good deal of attention to who is making the actual decisions about services, it becomes possible to distinguish, to an illuminating degree, who is actually empowered on matters of substance, and who is not. This is not all there is to empowerment, but it is central enough a vantage point on the exercise of authority and power, that it could certainly not be dismissed as being trivial, immaterial or irrelevant.

It is useful to take this question and convert this standard of “*the degree of authoritative decision-making carried by the person*” into a continuum from low to high, as this helps clarify the extent to which “empowerment” could be considered a matter of degree, rather than to have it be a simple “yes” or “no” variable. This then requires that there be some manner of scaling of the levels of authoritative personal decision-making into a spectrum from low to high. If the scale is too refined, it would potentially become a matter of hair splitting about increments of empowerment, whereas if it were too simple it might be much too blunt in capturing the nuances. So, it may be useful to start with a simple six level scale, with each level adding a greater degree of empowerment, at least as measured by the authoritative decision-making standard. What follows is an easy to use version of this.

Level One: This is a level where the person does not make any substantive decisions about their service.

Level Two: This is a level where the person does not make any substantive decisions about their service, *but* where the person is routinely informed about the decisions others will be making on their behalf.

Level Three: This is the level at which the person is routinely asked to give advice, (i.e. is consulted), by the *actual decision-makers*, about his/her personal service decisions.

Level Four: This is the level at which the person begins to routinely personally make *a significant minority* of the substantive decisions that constitute their personal service. A *significant minority*, in statistical terms, might range from 25%-45% of key decisions.

Level Five: This is the level at which the person routinely begins to personally make *a significant majority* of the substantive decisions that constitute their personal service. A *significant majority*, in statistical terms, might range from 55%-90% of key decisions.

Level Six: This is the level at which the person is so routinely making the vast majority of key decisions that they simply do not any longer believe that they have a meaningful empowerment issue.

It is all too common that most people will never see services, or service systems, that rise much above a level two or three. In fact, most people have never seen a level four or higher service, though these do exist, and are relatively easy to establish and maintain, despite the suggestion that such routine levels of empowerment would be utopian. What makes many people confused is that the empowerment rhetoric used by services makes it seem as if people have much more authority and power than they actually do. This is most obvious in the case of user involvement efforts, where “involvement” or “participation” is largely in regard to comparatively trivial issues, whereas the really authoritative decision-making still remains with people other than the person.

This simple exercise can do much to clarify what is the actual relationship of service users to the substantive decision-making that affects their lives and services. It can also be helpful for the formation of alternative models of service design and operation decision-making that can leave service users more empowered, in both a practical and substantive way. So, even as a speculative exercise, it can be beneficial in giving more concreteness to aspirations about “empowerment”

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