Eight Lessons on Power and Inequality: Reflections from Community Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand

権力と不平等をめぐる８つの教訓：アオテアロア・ニュージーランドのコミュニティ実践からの省察

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要旨

本論文は、アオテアロア・ニュージーランドの草の根 NGO における質的フィールドワークから導き出された８つの教訓を通して、コミュニティ実践における権力を省察的に検討するものである。長期的な振り返りに基づき、本稿は過去の研究を、より距離を置いた批判的視点から再考することで、権力がどのように経験され、交渉されるのかについて、より深い理解を提示する。分析では、権力が公式な制度や構造を通じてのみならず、参加、影響力、包摂を形づくる、微細で関係的かつしばしば言語化されない力学を通しても作用することを明らかにする。さらに、Urie Bronfenbrenner（1979）の生態学的枠組みおよび Isaac Prilleltensky（2008）の心理政治的視点に依拠しながら、権力が相互に連関する複数のレベルを横断していかに移動するのかを検討する。提示される８つの教訓は、参加と影響力の乖離、関係性が有効化と排除の双方をもたらす二重の役割、エンパワメントと依存の共存といった、コミュニティ実践における主要な緊張関係を浮き彫りにする。本稿の中心には、実践者としての研究者の役割が据えられており、その存在自体が権力関係を形成すると同時に、それらによって形づくられていることが示される。本論文は、権力を排除すべきものとして捉えるのではなく、より省察的かつ関係的なアプローチの必要性を主張する。すなわち、実践者が複数のレベルにまたがる権力を認識し、解釈し、それとともに働く能力を養うことの重要性を強調するものである。これにより、本稿はコミュニティ心理学における権力について、実践志向でありながら理論的基盤に根ざした視座を提示する。

キーワード：権力のダイナミクス、コミュニティ実践、リフレクシビティ、参加と影響力、インフォーマルな社会関係資本

ABSTRACT

This article presents a reflective examination of power in community-based practice through eight lessons developed from qualitative fieldwork with grassroots NGOs in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on long-term reflection,

the article revisits earlier research from a more distanced and critically informed perspective, allowing for a deeper understanding of how power is experienced and negotiated. The analysis explores how power operates not only through formal structures but also through subtle, relational, and often unspoken dynamics that shape participation, influence, and inclusion. Using an ecological framework informed by Bronfenbrenner(1979)and a psychopolitical perspective, Prilleltensky(2008), the article examines how power moves across interconnected levels of experience. The eight lessons highlight key tensions in community practice, including the gap between participation and influence, the dual role of relationships as enabling and exclusionary, and the coexistence of empowerment and dependency. Central to the reflection is the role of the researcher practitioner, whose presence both shapes and is shaped by power dynamics. Rather than positioning power as something to be eliminated, the article argues for a more reflexive and relational approach, where practitioners develop the capacity to recognise, interpret, and work with power across multiple levels. In doing so, the article contributes a practice oriented and theoretically grounded perspective on power within community psychology.

Keywords: Power Dynamics, Community-Based Practice, Reflexivity, Participation and Influence, Informal Social Capital

INTRODUCTION

In community work, power is often subtle. It is rarely stated clearly in meeting notes or formal roles. Instead, it tends to reveal itself in quieter ways, in patterns of interaction, spatial positioning, and unspoken assumptions about legitimacy and belonging. During my fieldwork within grassroots community settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, I became increasingly aware of these layered dynamics of power, visible, hidden, and deeply embedded in relationships. What I had initially approached as a site of participatory empowerment gradually revealed itself to be more complex. Over time, I came to see it as an ongoing negotiation between ideals of inclusion and the realities of hierarchy, dependency, and social positioning.

As my understanding developed, I began to recognise that power in community contexts is not something that can simply be removed or evenly distributed. Instead, it is something that must be continually noticed, interpreted, and navigated. This article reflects on moments and patterns from my fieldwork that reshaped how I understand power. These are not presented as abstract principles, but as reflections grounded in lived engagement with community practice. Together, they suggest that effective community work depends less on reducing power differences and more on developing the capacity to work with them thoughtfully and reflexively.

This article draws on retrospective reflection of qualitative fieldwork, informed by reflexive practice and ongoing engagement with community psychology theory. At the same time, these reflections are shaped not only by my experience in the field, but also by the distance that time has provided.

I conducted this research study approximately twelve years ago. At the time, I was deeply immersed in the field, analysing systems and relationships from within the immediacy of practice. Now, more than a decade later, I

find myself returning to these experiences with a different perspective. With this distance, I am able to step back and consider what I learned from a broader, more macro level viewpoint. As I revisited my original research, I realised that my understanding of power had continued to evolve. This article reflects that ongoing learning and brings together eight key lessons that have emerged through both practice and reflection over time.

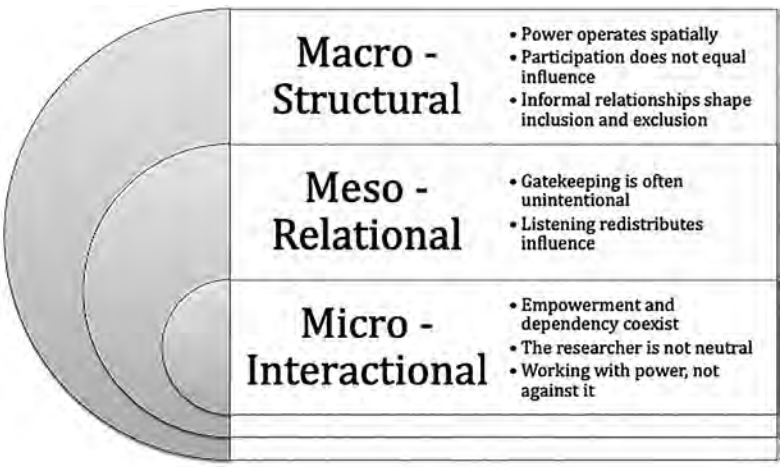
These reflections are situated within a broader Aotearoa New Zealand context shaped by structural inequalities and shifting welfare policies, where access to resources and opportunities remains unevenly distributed. Community organisations such as Urban Community, Okuyama(2014), operate within this landscape, supporting individuals experiencing marginalisation linked to unemployment, stigma, and limited access to social services. As a grassroots initiative grounded in participatory and empowerment oriented practice, Urban Community creates opportunities for service users to be actively involved in community life. At the same time, this context also made me more aware of how wider systems continue to shape the limits of participation and influence. This broader context became an important backdrop for how I began to understand power in everyday practice.

To make sense of these experiences, I developed a conceptual framework that captured recurring patterns observed in the field. This framework brought together relational power, visible and invisible forms of influence, informal social capital, and reflexivity. As I revisited this framework more recently, I realised that these dynamics could be understood more clearly through an ecological lens.

Drawing on the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner(1979), I began to see how power operates across interconnected levels. At the level of everyday experience, power is experienced through interactions and perceptions. This multi-level approach shows us that social issues are rooted in personal, relational, and societal factors(Furnham, 1989). Within relationships and networks, it is shaped through patterns of connection and belonging. Organisational structures and decision-making processes influence how power is distributed and enacted, while broader social and political systems define the conditions within which all of this takes place. Power does not sit neatly within one level, but emerges through their interaction(See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Power Across Ecological Levels in Community Practice



This perspective also resonates with Prilleltensky's (2008) concept of psychopolitical validity, which highlights how personal experiences are shaped by wider political and structural conditions. Bringing these perspectives together provided a way of linking personal reflection to broader theoretical understandings of power. The following eight lessons reflect how these ecological and psychopolitical dynamics became visible through practice, and how my understanding of power evolved over time.

Lesson 1: Power Is Often Spatial before It Is Verbal

During my research, I began to notice that power is often communicated through space rather than words. Physical environments and spatial arrangements signal hierarchy in ways that are rarely made explicit. For example, in many organisations, senior leaders occupy larger, private offices, while others work in shared or open spaces. These spatial differences are not just practical, they communicate status, access, and authority.

Such arrangements shape how individuals feel within a space, influencing whether they feel included, comfortable, or out of place. At the same time, they shape how others interpret belonging and legitimacy. These patterns are often tied to organisational norms and wider assumptions about hierarchy. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is socially produced and structured through hierarchy, which strongly resonated with my observations. What may initially appear to be minor, practical details are, in fact, significant indicators of power. Space is not neutral; it is a keyway that power becomes visible and normalised.

This highlights how power operates at the organisational level while shaping individual experience, reflecting an ecological understanding of power across levels. As attention shifts from space to interaction, it becomes important to consider how participation functions in practice.

Lesson 2: Participation Does Not Equal Influence

Participation is a central value in community work, reflecting a strong commitment to empowerment. However, it is important to recognise that being involved does not necessarily mean having influence. For example, in a workplace meeting, employees may share ideas and provide feedback, yet final decisions are often made by upper management, who may not even be present in the room.

This illustrates a key point: inclusion does not automatically lead to meaningful influence. Participation is typically visible and encouraged, while influence is shaped through less visible organisational processes and broader structural conditions. Prilleltensky (2008) highlights how power and resources are unevenly distributed, helping to explain this gap between voice and decision-making.

This demonstrates how power operates across ecological levels, with visible participation at the micro level and decision-making authority located at the macro level. Moving beyond formal structures, it becomes clear that power also operates through everyday relationships.

Lesson 3: Informal Relationships as Gateways and Gatekeepers of Inequality

Informal relationships are central to community life and can foster a strong sense of belonging. However,

they can also restrict access to resources and opportunities. Individuals with greater privilege and stronger social connections often move more easily through systems, while others remain on the margins, often as a result of structural racism. Structural racism refers to organisations' inequitable policies and practices that exclude the participation of non-dominant groups(Bond, 1999; Coombes & Te Hiwi, 2007; Glover et al., 2005; Huygens & Maria, 1999; Wepa, 2010).

This highlights a key point: relationships are not inherently inclusive. Putnam's(2000)concept of bonding social capital helps explain how close networks can both support insiders and exclude others. What appears to be supportive and community-oriented can simultaneously function as a barrier, depending on who has access to these networks.

This reflects how power operates through relational networks at the meso level, while also connecting to broader structural inequalities. These relational dynamics shape how empowerment is experienced in practice.

Lesson 4: Empowerment Can Coexist with Dependency

A key tension in my research is the coexistence of empowerment and dependency. During my fieldwork, individuals developed confidence and skills, yet their actions remained shaped by systems that did not change. I see this same pattern in my work as a lecturer. For example, when students are encouraged to speak freely, they often become more confident(individual empowerment). However, because they are still assessed through strict tests, they adjust what they say to align with what is rewarded.

This highlights a central point: people may feel empowered, but their choices are still constrained by existing structures. As Zimmerman(1995)explains, empowerment can grow at the individual level, while broader systems continue to shape what is possible. In this way, empowerment operates within structural boundaries and is reinforced through everyday practices.

Lesson 5: Gatekeeping is Often Unintentional

Gatekeeping is not always the result of deliberate exclusion. Instead, it often emerges through everyday practices such as language use, communication styles, and representation. For example, a group may rely on acronyms or insider language that feels natural to regular members. However, a newcomer may not understand these terms and may hesitate to speak. At the individual level, this can reduce confidence, while at the group level, it shapes patterns of participation.

This highlights a key point: exclusion is often produced unintentionally through routine interaction. Foucault(1977)suggests that power operates through everyday practices and discourses, helping to explain how these small, taken-for-granted moments can reproduce inequality over time.

This demonstrates how micro-level interactions are shaped by broader discursive power, reflecting a psychopolitical perspective. When considering these dynamics more closely, the role of the researcher becomes particularly important.

Lesson 6: The Researcher is Never Neutral

As a researcher embedded in fieldwork, I came to recognise that I was not separate from the power dynamics I was observing. Even without direct involvement, the researcher's presence shapes interaction. For example, when a researcher joins a community meeting, participants may speak more formally or cautiously, and quieter members may withdraw.

I experienced this directly when I employed participatory observation in my research(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This approach required me to actively engage in the daily lives and activities of the people I studied while simultaneously observing them(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As a result, my presence did not simply record the environment; instead, it influenced it. At different points, I found myself shaping interactions in unintended ways.

Fine(1994)and Denzin and Lincoln(2011)emphasise that this is an inherent aspect of qualitative research, reinforcing the importance of reflexivity. This highlights how the researcher operates within and across ecological levels, influencing both micro-level interactions and broader interpretations. If presence shapes dynamics, then attention and listening also play a critical role.

Lesson 7: Listening is a Form of Power Redistribution

Listening became one of the most important practices in my fieldwork. Over time, I came to understand it not just as a method, but as a way of actively shifting attention within interactions. For example, in a workplace, a manager may invite a quieter team member to share their perspective and then listen attentively. As a result, the focus of the discussion shifts, and that individual's ideas gain recognition.

This highlights a key point: listening can redistribute influence within an interaction. By directing attention in this way, it is possible to change whose voices are heard and valued. Rappaport(1987)emphasises the importance of voice in empowerment, which resonates strongly here. Moreover, listening is important because it creates a space for dialogue and negotiation(Neville & Wilson, 2009). While listening alone does not remove structural inequalities, it can create openings for different perspectives to be acknowledged.

This demonstrates how power can be redistributed at the micro level, even within broader structural constraints. Recognising these dynamics leads to a more realistic and practice-oriented understanding of power.

Lesson 8: Working with Power, Not Against It

Initially, I viewed power as something to be reduced or avoided. Over time, I came to understand it as an unavoidable and shaping force within all interactions and structures.

For example, in a workplace where employees are dissatisfied with a policy, a senior staff member may use their access to leadership to raise concerns and support others in being heard. Rather than avoiding power, they work with it to influence outcomes.

This highlights a key point: power is not only restrictive; it can also be used productively. Engaging with power involves recognising its different forms, understanding how it operates, and reflecting on one's own position within it. This offers a more realistic and effective way of navigating complexity in both organisational and community settings. Neville & Wilson(2009)describe this as a 'power with' approach rather than a 'power over'

approach.

This reflects a psychopolitical perspective, recognising how power can be actively navigated across levels to support more equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Looking back, I no longer see power as something external to community work. It is embedded within relationships, structures, and systems, and is constantly being negotiated. An ecological perspective helps explain how these dynamics connect across levels, while a psychopolitical lens highlights how personal experiences are shaped by wider conditions.

There are no simple solutions and no final answers. Instead, community practice involves continually noticing, questioning, and adjusting. Community practice, then, is not about stepping outside power, but about learning to engage with it carefully, reflexively, and responsibly.

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