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Chapter Ten

WHAT'S POWER GOT TO DO WITH IT?
EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL RESEARCH
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There are many arguments and discussions present in contemporary European Social Psychology which suggest that the analysis of power relationships should be a central concern for social psychology:

It is necessary to insert into social psychology a concern with problems of power, or, more precisely with relationships of power. If this is not done, ... (there is a) risk of skirting around a number of phenomena the study of which is indispensable for our understanding of certain forms of social behaviour.

(Deschamps 1982: 97)

Following Deschamps, this paper argues that power within social psychological research needs to be given a greater emphasis than presently occurs. Further, it is suggested that the assumption that empowerment is necessarily synonymous with 'giving a voice is not a valid one. Using the example of a research project about the ways in which politics is discussed by young working class people in Britain as a case-study, this paper suggests that silences, as well as 'giving a voice can be empowering. Frequently neglected questions such as who is being empowered, and in whose interests does the empowerment serve should, it is argued, form the basis for future debates about the empowering nature of social research.

Some of the issues over the question of power have been debated within anthropology. Discussions of ethnography, and whether there can be a feminist ethnography (Stacey 1988) have implied that feminism attempts to find ways of transforming the [142] research. It is the third aspect which is to be the main focus of the paper, but I shall briefly discuss the other two aspects first.

POWER RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND RESEARCHED

A starting point in discussing this issue is to note that it is the researcher, who, within certain confines of funding (which are clearly not unimportant), by defining the research, has power in relation to 'those researched'. This means, for example, that decisions not only about the conduct of the study, but also the write-up, the analysis, and what is determined to be peripheral or irrelevant lie, in the main, with the researcher. This power of the researcher is, however, not always noted or analysed - precisely because the power is transparent. Because of this transparency, the *processes* by which research material is omitted from either the analysis or the

write-up come to be understood as natural or obvious. A certain type of material is often omitted, therefore, because of the desire and the necessity to present a clean study, which is as uncontaminated as possible.

Power may be understood a little more clearly if we force the power away from such a clean, transparent framework, and, instead, present it so that it is *seen* and, in being seen, can be examined and analysed. Some researchers who are developing a feminist analysis to examine their research methods (for example, Griffin 1986) are beginning to do precisely this. For example, by deciding to answer questions about oneself, if asked by interviewees, rather than avoid such questions (see Oakley 1981 for a sharp and witty insight into the textbook approaches to interviewing), a researcher can begin, in the very analysis of such questions, to gain an insight into the ways in which the subjects perceive the researcher. It is this type of insight which can become a central focus for the analysis of the power relationships. Thus, I am suggesting that not only is it impossible to have a clean piece of research, but, rather, that it is the very messiness, the apparently awkward questions from the researched which are desirable; it is these questions which should not be written out of any research report precisely because they can provide a starting point for the analysis of power between researchers and researched. Equally important, such 'messiness' reflects the complexities and realities [144] of the interviewees views of themselves and the complexities of their view of the researcher - and so, may end up being a more accurate picture of their lives.

SOCIALLY ASCRIBED CHARACTERISTICS AND POWER

It is true to say that sometimes, social psychological research has ignored the power inequalities which are consequent upon the hierarchical loadings assigned to socially ascribed characteristics. Many times, however, we have tried to control for unevenness in these characteristics by ensuring that women interview women, black researchers interview black people, and so on. It is the concept of 'experimenter effect' (Rosenthal 1966) which is used to understand this 'matching' of researcher and researched. However, if it is accepted that such matching is desirable in order to minimise the impact of power inequalities in social research, the argument may be taken one step further, and suggest that, rather than sidestepping the question of power, more may be learnt about its functioning in research if the usual balance of power which flows from socially ascribed characteristics is both inverted and, therefore, subverted. A particular research project which has achieved this inversion and subversion - that is, where the more frequently encountered relationships of subordination and domination have been inverted within the research - has been discussed elsewhere (Bhavnani 1986a).

My

present research, through an inversion of the more frequent balance of power, has such subversion as part of its structure. A black woman researcher interviewing black and white 16-year-old working-class people means that I, and the interviewees in the study, were inscribed within multi-faceted power relations which have both structural dominance and structural subordination in play on both sides. It is this less frequently encountered power asynchrony, or this 'messiness', which can allow for the analysis of the power relationships within social research. In addition, as *conscious* attention and interaction with the dynamics of power in research is focused upon, so a more complex view of how research subjects view themselves and their world may be available. In short, social research can avoid being synonymous with social stereotyping and, instead, become important in the construction [145] of different sets of

discursive realities about particular groups – these realities being both resonant with, and reflective of, the material realities.

EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

The central focus of this paper, however, is to discuss issues of power from a different angle – namely that of empowerment. In order to define empowerment, it is necessary to define power. Other writers in this book have explored the implications of the ways in which Foucault has developed arguments about power: at its crudest, Foucault's writings may be understood as questioning the widely received notion that power merely resides in powerful individuals. In his challenging approach, however, Foucault does not appear to have presented an account of the way in which the powerful make history, and nor has he systematically examined the ways in which resistances challenge that ability to make history. Flacks (1983) is helpful here, for he suggests that power may be defined as the capacity to challenge historical forces, and so, to make history; thus, power becomes the capacity to influence the condition and terms of the everyday life of a community or society. While his argument is centred around the ways in which this capacity, when realised, is disruptive of daily life, the point of using this definition within this chapter is to create a notion of power which allows that, potentially, dominated groups may have access to power.

Empowerment can then be taken as being the realisation of this capacity. Within the human sciences, oral history – both the method and the discipline – has often been cited as *the* exemplar of how social research can be empowering. The work of Paserini (1987), for example, as well as the insights provided by Wright (1985), certainly imply that historical work is very important in providing a means of understanding how the present, and possible future change, is influenced by the ways in which the past is remembered and understood. However, in many discussions of empowerment (and the above studies are an exception) there is an implicit assumption that qualitative research is important, if not the only means of empowerment for those who are defined as the researched – in other words, such research is seen as giving a [146] voice to the interviewees, and is, therefore, empowering (as, for example, argued by Mishler 1986). Empowerment and 'having a voice' are not, however, the same, although the two are often conflated. For example, one can cite research which has been conducted in Britain with black residents where such research has reproduced an image of the black residents as victims or problems: this has, indeed reinforced stereotypes (see for example, Community Relations Commission 1976). Such research may be given considerable credibility because not only is there the implicit assumption that it is empowering because it is supposed to have 'given a voice' or 'authenticity', such research can, however, in masking the power inequalities present within that research, be part of a disempowerment. It is a disempowerment because it reproduces social stereotypes of those who are the subjects of the research – stereotypes which have previously been important in disallowing access to power.

The
problems with the general criterion of giving a voice are of two sorts. First, although it is acknowledged that some voices have been silenced, the lack of adequate attention to the reasons for this silencing means that the voices of the silenced come to be understood as being of equal value to those which have preceded them. The difficulty with this equal weighting is that the heretofore silenced voices cannot then be seen as forms of resistance or challenge to domination – their inclusion is merely seen as helpful in providing a more accurate picture. What I would

argue, however, is that it is not only inaccurate to provide such a limited picture, but, also that the processes which led to the initial silencing and then the permission to speak remain unconsidered, and hence, uninterrogated. The second problem is related to this lack of interrogation. For not only is it then necessary to interrogate the ways in which the silenced voices are inscribed within unequal power relationships, but further, it is necessary to make explicit the political framework which underpins such an interrogation. If the presentation of an explicit political framework is avoided and the unstated voices are the voices of reaction, then these come to be celebrated in the same way as the voices of [147] the dispossessed. For example, it could be argued that the poststructuralist approach which suggests that radical activity simply involves the opening up of a space for different readings is implicated in such an, at best, naivety.

These points may be clarified, and the general argument of this paper exemplified by examining some aspects of a research study which I have conducted in the recent past (Bhavnani 1988). In so doing, I want to stress that I have no intention or desire to present it as a project which has been totally successful in negotiating such issues. I am, however, using it as a case study to demonstrate my general points about the distinction between empowerment and 'having a voice'.

The project is one which explored, using social psychological theories, the ways in which young working-class people in Britain presented and discussed their views on issues which reside within the domain of the political. Using open-ended interviewing techniques, 72 working-class sixteen year olds in Manchester, England, were interviewed between February and May 1985, about their view of society, and the political processes within it. The issues for the interviews were developed from group discussions held with approximately 90 of these young people, of whom 72 were interviewed as described. Following these 35A5 minute interviews, 60 of the group were followed up six months later, and similar interviews were conducted, most being close to 45 minutes in length. The issues covered in the interviews were employment, unemployment, the prospects for employment opportunities for young people in Britain, racism, parliamentary parties, marriage, violence against women and children, nuclear power, and their futures in ten years' time. In addition, two industrial disputes, those of the miners and schoolteachers, were discussed, these being issues which were very present in the public domain at the time of the interviews. Approximately one-third of the group were white and the other two-thirds were black - of whom half were of Afro-Caribbean origin, and half of Indian sub-continent origin. Approximately half of those interviewed were young women. Thus, the study is a social psychological analysis of the arguments presented about politics by working-class young people. The research was situated in the context of their leaving school and moving into the labour market - either as employed or as [148] unemployed. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and some aspects not reported in this paper have been reported elsewhere (Bhavnani 1986b).

The academic discourses which analyse and describe politics amongst young people are often polarised into discourses of political activity or political apathy. It is this latter discourse, that of political apathy, which I want to look at here. Seventy per cent of the sample said they would vote in the next British General Election, meaning that 30 per cent of the sample said they would not. This mirrors levels of voting in general elections in Britain. However, it has been implied in some work (such as that of Taylor 1983, for example) that not voting is synonymous with political apathy.

- KKB: What do you think of the government?
 BH544: I don't like her (Margaret Thatcher)
 KKB: What don't you like about her?
 BH544: Don't like her - full stop.
 KKB: Say a bit more...
 BH544: There's a lot of reasons. One, she's all for herself. Two, - the cabinet. I don't like 'em. I mean they all look like a bunch of criminals even she does. I suppose she is in a way.
- KKB: How do you mean?
 BH544: I mean like she's cutting off the jobs and she's trying to say I'm trying to get more jobs in the country. There's no way she can do that. If she's cutting the jobs up, no way she's getting more jobs in. As long as she's in power there's no-one working as far as I'm concerned. I mean I can't vote. I mean I don't really understand what it's about, but I'm coming to the age that I should start thinking about it. I think if I do, I wouldn't vote Conservative.
- KKB: Who would you vote for?
 BH544: I won't vote Labour - when Heath - no the man after him - who was it - the Prime Minister - Callaghan, that's it, yeah - he promised jobs. They got nothing. I mean he was doing exactly the same as Thatcher's doing now. I mean if the two of them got together and joined as one party it'd still be the same. I mean [149] Kinnock's not doing much really, is he? I mean all he's doing is just sitting on his buttock.... I mean he promised the miners something but they didn't get it, did they? Stupid. I wouldn't vote, I reckon.
- KKB: Who's the sort of person who might get your vote? What would they have to be like?
 BH544: An MP? - Well, just say they got someone in the Labour Party - say they promised jobs and you got 'em - then I'd vote. If they promised jobs and they got the jobs I'd definitely vote for them.

From this, we can see that although the speaker has said he will not vote, it would not be accurate to say he is politically apathetic. To draw out his reference to previous prime ministers of Britain, and his analysis of the potential contributions of politicians, necessitated the use of open-ended interviewing techniques, which have demonstrated that he is an individual who is interested in party politics. To have categorised him as politically apathetic would have been to perpetuate a discursive reality which is at odds with the everyday lives and arguments of this group of young people, as seen in the above.

It would also be true to say that he has been 'given a voice as a consequence of this project. Has he been empowered as a consequence? The positive answer to this question is based upon the use of a notion of empowerment which requires that the empowerment of subjects through social research means that in being 'given a voice' subjects may also begin to present narratives; and that through their narratives, people may be moved beyond their words to the possibility of action. That is, that they may begin to realise their capacity to create history. His comments about party politics, ending with a notion that he may vote in a particular situation can be analysed in this way. To be empowered, Mishler (1986) suggests, is to be speaking in one's own voice; this speaking provides a basis for applying the insights so acquired, to form a basis for action in accord with one's own interests.

In the individual second interviews, there was a substantial part in which the interviewees discussed unemployment with me.

KKB: Why do you say that there aren't many jobs around?

BH58: I reckon it's due to Margaret Thatcher. On telly she says she wants employment but she doesn't really. [150]

KKB: What makes you say that she doesn't really - what makes you think that?

BH58: When you watch telly and the way she goes on there was this programme we was watching on Sunday and they were talking about how the West Indians should go back to you know, their thingy, 'cause they don't want to work, and I watching that. She's like saying that and if they pass a law all the West Indians will have to go back to their own country 'cause we don't want to work, we just want to laze about - that's what the telly said. Me mum was watching - she went mad.

KKB: Why do you say it's hard to get jobs?

BH524: I think because a lot of people haven't got the qualifications they need really and I know that there's a lot of black people that have got good qualifications but I reckon it's because of their colour that they can't get the job they want. I thing the room is there but I think people just don't want them because of their colour. I reckon if a white person came along with less qualifications but still had a good chance of getting it, I think they'd give it to him.

These two speakers, both black, demonstrate how most of the black interviewees, in their one-to-one interviews with me, discussed racialism as an integral part of their ideas about unemployment. Again, it could be argued that in being given a voice, and using the notion of empowerment suggested earlier, the black interviewees were empowered.

Not one of the white interviewees, in their discussions of unemployment, touched on the issue of racial discrimination or racism with me. We need to ask 'why not?' The group discussions had covered the issue of racialism (initiated by the school students themselves) as had the first interviews, so the interviewees were aware that the explicit and implicit framework of the research could be to discuss racialism and racism if they so wished. Most of the white interviewees had earlier said that individual acts of racial discrimination were undesirable. From their spontaneous questions, it was clear that they had defined me as black, and, so may have assumed that, I too, had experienced such discrim- [151]ination. This absence on the part of the white interviewees to initiate the discussion on racialism could be 'explained' by arguing that they had never experienced racism. However, this last explanation would ignore the point that they were all able to discuss their futures, house ownership, management of small businesses: all parts of their lives of which they had no experience. So, an experiential explanation is not sufficient to account for this absence. But, putting to one side the reasons for this absence (touched upon in Bhavnani 1986a), how may this silence be analysed?

It could be speculated that the absence of racist views in the discussions of unemployment was empowering - both for black people and for the white interviewees. Empowering for black people because ideas which have been used to oppress have not been expressed; and empowering for white people because it demonstrates that racism is not a necessary, or, indeed, a sufficient explanation when discussing causes of unemployment. The absence of racist explanations, was empowering, in other words, because of the silence - because it was not given a voice; racism was not expressed. This argument can also be seen in Minh-ha when she states:

Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored.

(*Minh-ha 1988: 74*)

In considering empowerment in this way, it can be seen that empowerment and giving a voice are not necessarily synonymous.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me conclude by saying that I am suggesting that:

1. an analysis of power should be a part of all research, even if such an analysis is not the primary focus of the research.
2. That it is not *qualitative* research, per se, which is sufficient to provide a voice for dominated groups. Rather, it is the conceptual and theoretical basis for the research which may be the starting point when considering empowerment and social research. [152]
3. I am arguing that the concept of empowerment has been overdetermined by the idea of 'giving a voice'. It is true that, often, 'giving a voice' may be a necessary step towards empowerment -using the definition of empowerment with which I began. But such an emphasis can also hide, or mask, the reasons *why* the voices are not being heard, or listened to. In other words, the idea of 'giving a voice' must provide a simultaneous analysis of those who are potential hearers, and why they do not hear.
4. Finally, it is crucial, also, to consider carefully 'who is being empowered?' In whose interests does that empowerment serve? For example, Billig's (1978) work on a social psychological analysis of fascists was aimed at disempowering the group he was researching. And, so, the empowerment was aimed at those who challenge fascism, not those who espouse it.

Thus, it is clear that discussions of empowerment must be grounded in the wider nexus of political, economic, and social power relationships. For it is only as power is deconstructed, and the ways in which the inscriptions of the different elements are analysed, that it can be possible for social psychology to not claim to, as Brecht argues when discussing drama, simply represent reality, but also to suggest the possibility of the alteration of the reality. And, to paraphrase Adorno, it is necessary to begin by magnifying the splinter of glass in the eye of psychology.

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