Empowering social action through narratives of identity and culture

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**SUMMARY**

Concern at widening health and wealth inequities between communities accompanying processes of globalization in recent years are reflected in contemporary definitions of health promotion, premised on the stratagem of individuals and communities increasing control over factors that determine health, thereby improving their health status. Such community empowerment practice is commonly accepted within the health promotion literature as encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal and socio-political elements. Less articulated and understood, however, are the processes whereby the identities and cultures of marginalized communities intersect with and reverberate through these levels of action. The potential of identity and culture as important individual and community resources within social action takes on further significance within globalized contexts, which simultaneously expose marginalized communities to dominant cultural power relations while affording members new avenues for cultural expression. In this paper we highlight culture and identity as important aspects of the empowerment process, drawing on the experiences of migrant Tongan and Samoan women throughout a social action process in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In particular, narratives of identity and culture within storytelling as an empowerment practice are explicated, as is the articulation of identity and culture within more structurally orientated power relations throughout subsequent activities related to policy advocacy.

**Key words**: culture; empowerment; narrative; social action

**INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary economic globalization is increasing the movement of people and cultures, particularly from less developed to economically advanced (largely Western) nations. The dominant force behind such movement is market liberalization and its accompanying political discourse of neo-liberalism, which in many countries equates with decreased public spending and wealth transfers, and increased poverty or income inequalities. What impact is this having on the growing number of ‘communities-at-the-margins’ within wealthier countries, particularly on their ability to influence the shape of policy discourse and decision-making?

This question underpinned a 3-year participatory action research (PAR) project in Aotearoa/New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, in Canada (Williams, 2001). The project examined how members of marginalized groups could increase their role in policy work/advocacy on underlying determinants of health and well-being (such as poverty, discrimination or other aspects of social exclusion), and the role of community-based organizations and community workers in such a
process. Theoretically, the project acknowledged the hegemony of neo-liberalism and its supplanting of citizenship rights with consumer preferences (Lister, 1998). Empirically, shifts in labour market, social welfare and other public policies have increased poverty rates for many communities-at-the-margins, making it more difficult for them to engage in such political activity or to reclaim an identity as ‘citizens’. But the project was equally premised on new social movement and feminist theories, arguing, in part, that certain aspects of contemporary globalization also create opportunities for empowering forms of cultural expression. Such expression gives greater voice to the conditions of marginalized groups, the so-called ‘politics of difference’ (Sarup, 1996), through which group members exercise agency and power by drawing upon identities, values and beliefs that are counter-cultural or counter-hegemonic.

Alongside these developments, storytelling has re-emerged as a method with which people might begin to challenge dominant social discourses (and hence social structures) through their assertion of non-dominant cultural constructions, personal identities and world views in the public sphere. This article describes one application of such storytelling. It is written retrospectively, and hence appears as a seamless, theoretically neat development. It was not. The ups and downs of group dynamics and community organizing were expected. But neither the action researcher (L. W.), who undertook this project for her doctoral dissertation, nor her thesis supervisors (R. L. and M. O.) anticipated the extent to which the politics of cultural and gender identities became inseparable from those of policy advocacy, and essential to any social action outcome that might be considered ‘empowering’.

It should be noted that the term ‘Pacific peoples’, as used below, describes people living in Aotearoa/New Zealand who have migrated from the Pacific Islands or who identify with the Pacific Islands because of their ancestry or heritage. This term is one of convenience and encompasses a diverse range of peoples (that includes people from the Pacific Island nations of Tonga and Samoa) from the South Pacific region. It should also be noted that Hilltown is not the neighbourhood’s real name. All other names have been altered to protect the anonymity of the participants, and references to any studies or accounts that identify the real neighbourhood have been removed.

HILLTOWN AND THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL EXCLUSION

Over the past 15 years, successive New Zealand governments introduced a number of policies now commonly associated with economic globalization, including market liberalization and deregulation, flatter tax structures, privatization of many public services and decreased state assistance to those in need (Boston et al., 1999). The brunt of these reforms has been borne unevenly. Maori, Pacific peoples, women, children and people with disabilities have experienced higher levels of poverty and unemployment (Boston et al., 1999; Blaiklock, 2000; Ministry of Health, 2000). They also experience a higher degree of social exclusion, which we take to mean not simply economic exclusion, but a more general and pervasive inability to exercise political power by influencing public discourse and policy debate. (While very much the case during the period of the research project, a change in government since then is increasing the social space for such peoples’ political participation.)

Hilltown is an ethnically diverse area relative to other parts of Auckland, and has large Pacific, Maori and European communities living within it. Many residents are recent migrants. Hilltown has a large concentration of state-owned houses, high unemployment rates and some serious social problems. Residents’ concerns include limited local employment opportunities, high crime rates and poor quality, unaffordable housing. Kinship networks, churches and community organizations provide a sense of community and belonging for many Hilltown residents. At the same time, ethnic and religious factions exist within the community and some residents are isolated by issues of poverty through lack of ability to participate and associated feelings of shame. The area has high proportions of children and young people. Perceptions of economically and culturally dominant communities are often stigmatizing, labelling the area as ‘crime-ridden’ and ‘notorious’. Despite all of these barriers to self-determination, the Hilltown Marae, its many churches and other community organizations provide focal points for a ‘sense of community’. [The marae is the focal point of Maori (the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand) culture and communal activities. Official definitions refer to marae as meaning the courtyard in front of the wharenui (meeting house); however,
common usage of the term today, as used in this study, generally refers to an entire complex (inclusive of the meeting house, courtyard in front, kitchen, sleeping quarters and general facilities). Many residents do large amounts of voluntary work and there are some significant initiatives within the area whose main resources are enthusiasm and community spirit.

The research project in Hilltown involved women from different Pacific Islands. Their context differed from that of other poor groups in the neighbourhood. Brought originally to New Zealand as a cheap source of unskilled labour in the 1950s, Pacific peoples have been particularly affected by labour market restructuring (Spoonley, 1996; Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 1999). Poverty rates are particularly high and deep within Pacific communities (O’Brien, 1998; Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 1999), and many face the added burden of sending remittances ‘home’ to their extended families. The ‘feminization of poverty’ in Aotearoa/New Zealand further compounds Pacific women’s economic marginalization, with incomes of Pacific women being well below those of Pacific men (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 1999). For most of the women in the research project, economic marginalization compounded by issues of gender and race had corroded their ability to exercise the human agency that lies at the heart of citizenship (Lister, 1998).

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In broad terms, the research project attempted to answer the question ‘How can economically and culturally marginalized communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand become more empowered to take action together to improve their health and well-being within a global economy?’. In narrower terms, it was concerned with understanding better processes of community empowerment, i.e. how communities strengthen their ability to take collective action on issues of their choosing, and to make positive changes in their environments. Empowerment was understood to be a multi-levelled construct, involving intrapersonal, interpersonal and socio-political elements (Wallerstein, 1992; Rissel, 1994). Community empowerment practice generally bases itself upon community development methods. The methods utilized in this research draw on the tradition of transformative populism (Kennedy et al., 1990), which attempts to develop and link community-based identities and/or culturally based constituencies to structural levels of oppression in ways that challenge the dominance of capital and class.

The chosen research method (participatory action research) is an ideal process for operationalizing the concepts of community empowerment and community development. Action research is a cyclic process of enquiry through which participants move through successive phases of action and reflection (evaluation), with each phase informing the next (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). Its key components are extensive collaboration and a reciprocal education process between researchers and the community, and an emphasis on taking action on the issues under study. The researcher’s role (L. W.) as a co-participant in the advocacy research was intended to be a facilitating and enabling one, combining the functions of researcher and community development practitioner. This meant that L. W. also took her place in the group as a co-participant who would be telling her own story.

THE WOMEN’S ADVOCACY GROUP (WAG)

The research project was developed in collaboration with Goodworks, a community outreach programme initiated by a religious order in Hilltown. A primary objective of this programme is the empowerment of Hilltown residents through skills development and increased input into social policy, which elided neatly with the research project’s questions. Through consultation with Goodworks and community workers in the area, an advocacy group of eight women was formed. The group contained several different identity groupings in the areas of ethnicity (Tongan, Samoan, Palangi), sexuality, spiritual or religious beliefs and motherhood. (The term ‘Palangi’ is the Tongan word for European, and is used interchangeably with the term ‘Palagi’; the latter is the Samoan word for European and is used when a Samoan person is talking.) Relationships between members at the commencement of the group reflected those already described within the wider Hilltown community, in that both alliances and factions existed.

The advocacy research project consisted of four phases, each lasting between 3 and 6 months. The establishment of the group during phase one included the development of group norms,
building a mutual understanding of the project, and deciding on planning and review processes. A community advisory group was also formed during this phase for the purpose of guiding the development of the research, giving advice of cultural and local development issues and ensuring accountability to relevant communities in Hilltown. Phase two consisted of storytelling, during which each member told her life story to the group using whatever medium she was comfortable with. During phase three, group members selected the advocacy issue of housing and child health, explored aspects of power relative to acting on the issue and learnt media advocacy skills. In phase four, the group undertook a child health and safety survey of 42 Housing New Zealand (state-owned) houses in the Hilltown area. The release of the survey findings at a public meeting resulted in widespread media coverage of the issues and some action by Housing New Zealand to remedy the problems. The remainder of the paper discusses phase two (storytelling) of the research.

THE PREPARATION PROCESS FOR STORYTELLING

The transformative power of storytelling is widely acclaimed. Therapists (Epston and White, 1990) and social workers (Pitt, 1998) have written about its healing capacities with respect to individuals and families. Rappaport (Rappaport, 1993; Rappaport, 1995) has emphasized its capacity to build community, while other writers (Shor and Freire, 1987; Razack, 1993) have concentrated their efforts on storytelling as a method for challenging dominant social structures or improving community work practice (Labonte et al., 1999). The storytelling methodology developed in this study attempted to integrate all of these different transformative uses.

There are several reasons why storytelling holds considerable empowering potential for communities at the economic and cultural margins. Storytelling is acknowledged as a method for building trust and connection between people (James, 1996), lending itself well to the task of strengthening relationships in fragmented communities. Through telling their own stories people may discover new self-perceptions and strengths that fall outside previous ‘problem saturated’ (Epston and White, 1990) or negative constructions, held either by themselves or others. Storytelling within group and community development work allows people to reveal and strengthen new communal narratives that challenge dominant narratives, and to (re)construct communities as empowered rather than disempowered collectives. Such communal narratives play an important role for individuals in sustaining changes within their own personal lives (Rappaport, 1995). At a structural level of change, storytelling has the potential to uncover knowledge that has been subjugated to dominant ideas, particularly when groups at the economic or cultural margins engage in a shared process of storytelling (Pitt, 1998).

A decision for culture and identity

The original intention of the research had been to follow Freire’s (Shor and Freire, 1987) model of social change and critical pedagogy, in which group members would all tell stories around a particular issue, in this case one relating to low income. This method emphasizes the linking of personal experiences to dominant social structures around the axiom of class. At the first community advisory group meeting, which included two members of WAG itself, the place of culture and identity within the research was raised. WAG members had already expressed this need in a variety of ways, such as a sense of emptiness and missing of their families, cultures and ways of life that they had left behind in Tonga and Samoa.

But still the emptiness in me that I miss my family (in Samoa) and the other way because here, you staying in a house, you know, closed house. But in Samoa it is open up, you know, you can walk from here to there (and easily talk with your neighbours).

Other group members experienced a sense of disconnection and lack of cultural pride within their families and ethnic communities:

The mother I have now, she always tell me to speak English to my family and I say ‘Look here, I not a Palagi (European). I’m a Samoan’ ... I always speak Samoan to my son and my mum, she gets mad. She says, I should not speak Samoan to my son. I should speak English. I say, ‘well the way I brought up I am a Samoan and now my kids grow up I want them to be a Samoan too. No matter what country we live’. I feel like my mum wants to deny our son Samoan.

Some blooming Tongans, all you know is that they are Tongans because you saw them in the funeral or a
wedding. Then when you went to the office (government agency) they ignore you and don’t know you, you know, don’t want to know you or don’t want to be known as a Tongan.

These statements affirmed the growing emphasis on culture and identity as important aspects of empowerment. It was decided, then, to work with research participants (WAG members) in a way that built upon their rich plural identities rather than being limited to the singular identity of ‘women on low incomes’. The advocacy issue would arise through this broader approach to sharing personal stories.

Sowing the seeds for the storytelling
The process of the storytelling incorporated elements of both personal and group empowerment. Its purpose was to:

- Strengthen our connection to our identities, cultures and values;
- Build self esteem and confidence through sharing our stories;
- Build some common narratives from our experiences;
- Build a sense of group and belonging; and
- Draw out issues for advocacy and speaking out.

Hine, a Maori woman and cultural advisor to Goodworks, helped the group prepare for the storytelling in relation to the issues of culture and identity. An important assumption underlying this work (held by L. W. and increasingly shared by other group members) was that poverty was viewed as encompassing loss of tradition, identity, families, friends, relationship to land, values and beliefs in addition to economic resources. Hine spent time listening and talking with the women around their experiences of leaving their home-lands and coming to New Zealand. Parallels were drawn between the loss of land, identity, language and culture for Maori as a result of colonization, and the similar losses for some of the group members in terms of being cut off from their cultural roots as immigrants to Aotearoa. Hine suggested to the group that the loss of land, family and identity in coming to another country often result in immigrants disconnecting from important parts of themselves. Storytelling work would be about reconnecting with identities and retrieving a sense of wholeness.

TELLING OUR STORIES
By the time the group started sharing its stories, it had been meeting at least weekly for 3 months. Group members were encouraged to write their own stories prior to telling them and were invited to use different media to express these. To assist with the crafting of stories, L. W. interviewed each woman about life back home, cultural values and identity, and their experience of coming to and living in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

To help with trust and safety, the process of storytelling was quite structured. It was emphasized that the privilege of hearing another person’s story was a gift and that the listeners’ part was just as important as that of the tellers. After each woman told her story, each other member of the group would give a ‘gift’ back by saying what the story had touched inside for them. [The concept of ‘gift’ had been introduced by Hine in the preparation phase of the storytelling and refers to the gift of oneself, meaning that being oneself with others is enough. This is similar to the reflective circle used in the storytelling method developed by Labonte et al. (Labonte et al., 1999), in which listeners immediately share a comment on how the story they have heard affects them or is like their own story.] This ‘giving back’ to the storyteller was very important and ensured that the storyteller could see her own ‘beautiful’ reflection in the listeners’ mirror.

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE: DRAWING OUT THREADS OF AGENCY
The shared stories were of a very personal nature. Generally, there was more focus on listening and being with the emotional content rather than critiquing and analysing the underlying structural determinants that had shaped people’s experiences. Despite the group diversity, members were still able to cross the cultural boundaries and bridge differences (in practices of spirituality, sexual identity, and world views and various life-choices, for example) that had not been encountered before by many of them.

What you said about your story is so interesting how you cared for your grandmother and I almost burst into tears when you said you weren’t there to look after her … but I didn’t really know you that well … but now with what you shared … I can really see …
how you really hurt um … looking at you as you are different person you are different religion from all of us. We are not here because we are Catholic and non-Catholics. We are here as family and you are a Samoan and I’m a Tongan. We are all Pacific Islanders and we helping each other that’s all I’m grateful for.

The storytelling methodology enabled L. W.’s own identity as a Palangi lesbian (which is integral to who she is) to be introduced into the group within the broad context of her life journey and cultural identity. This is quite remarkable given that many Pacific peoples hold strong religious beliefs that proscribe against homosexuality (Tupuola, 1998). The increased visibility of her own cultural identity within the group as a result of the storytelling enabled her to be ‘more fully present’ at meetings and to form more authentic relationships with other group members than she had been able to previously. Both presence and authenticity are important aspects of personal and group power.

In the month following the storytelling, the group formally evaluated its impact on members and on the group as a whole. Comments are clustered into six categories, with examples provided.

Healing and transformation:

The group has meant a lot to me and my family. It has helped me to change some of the life. Have lived the past to a better life.

Confidence building:

We the mothers … we become strong and we have the confidence as citizens—no one treat us like a door mat like that.

Drawing courage and inspiration:

After hearing everyone’s story … today I feel so sad and upset. I cry and smile when that person cry and smile. But above all I realise how strong and courageous women are in this group.

Reconnection and pride in Tongan and Samoan identities

Thank you … for being a strong woman and proud to be a Samoan. I’m proud too to be a Samoan. I will never forget my birth (place). Thank you again.

I learn a lot by hearing different experiences that each of us have been individually. But I won’t forget how we always consider and being proud of ourselves for who we are, not matter what we are. Tongan and Samoan women living in Aotearoa as a second home.

Group building and belonging:

I notice a great deal of change in the group—that we are more close and open to each other and more socializing and more belonging and that all members of the group feel like they belong to a family they can rely on.

Increasing awareness of different cultures and world views:

Your story make me open my eyes; the world is so big.

The group (storytelling) makes my mind spread out, to think more.

Common narratives within the group formed around two main areas. The first concerned the struggles experienced by the group’s Tongan and Samoan members as immigrant women coming to Aotearoa. Among the themes were stories of abuse and exploitation, and issues of cultural transition and conflict. The second area concerned shared experiences as women. Sharing stories in a space in which one’s identities and ‘being’ was held sacred and nurtured not only strengthened each group member’s sense of who they were, it also gave them an increased sense of belonging. After the storytelling, group members commonly described the group as a ‘family they could share with and rely on’.

Storytelling also created opportunities for increased group efficacy. This was particularly true for stories that were shared across boundaries of class and ethnicity. While the possibilities for exercising new-found knowledge were tempered by structural power relations, some new options for action and exercising agency in the world were also created.

It has been a while … since we finish school, and … then we meet husband and make babies and that, and then it sort of keep us from … learning, stop us from learning. But then ever since we have the [storytelling], our mind and focus start to take on learning … I realised that we will never stop learning.

TURNING STORIES INTO ACTION

The increased personal and group levels of empowerment that resulted from the storytelling became apparent as the advocacy research project progressed. Individual and group agency was also enhanced further through an increased emphasis on the use of critical dialogue
(Shor and Freire, 1987) for learning and transformation during phase three. Women in the group talked about being treated ‘on a lower level’ by people within government agencies because of the way they ‘talked’ or because they did not have formal qualifications. Group members became increasingly more outspoken about the ways in which they experienced being stereotyped and treated as ‘low-income, immigrant Tongan and Samoan women’ by government agencies, within the private sector and by the general public. Generalizing about some of her experiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand, one woman said:

... being an Islander and then a Tongan, you find there’s people you get on with and ... there’s ... some people looking at you as Pacific Islanders, you don’t get along with even if you haven’t done anything bad to them. They just look at your colour and you’re a ‘Pacific Islanders’—that’s it.

Spontaneous stories of various injustices experienced by group members that arose in group planning sessions also provided fertile opportunities for dialogue around underlying causes and power relations. Group member awareness and agency, individually and collectively, was increased through a growing consciousness that wove back and forth, linking the personal and political worlds.

It was also during this time that the potential of ‘home’ as a place where structural inequalities are perpetuated or as a site of ‘resistance’ became apparent. During phase three, two women withdrew from the group and another contemplated it. While new knowledge had been created in relation to roles outside the home as women, some male and senior family members who argued their place was at home with their children were also challenging their continued attendance at the group. Open discussion within the group of these issues, and ways in which group members could be supported to resist claims designed to keep them ‘in a traditional role’, eventually stabilized membership.

**CONCLUSION**

The Women’s Advocacy Group is presently ‘in recess’ as they lack the organizational infrastructure to continue with their housing advocacy activities. Goodworks conducted some preliminary research regarding the continuation of housing advocacy activities in the area, but has not approached group members about supporting their continued work. Group members continue to act to change their housing conditions, articulating their realities and circumstances within a context of cultural and political marginalization. They have also taken the advocacy work into other areas of their lives. One woman reported that the experience of the housing advocacy activities gave her the confidence to lead other employees in her work place in bargaining for better wages and conditions, something that would have been unthinkable for her at one time.

The storytelling work done by the group, with its emphasis on culture, identity and difference, was empowering within itself for group members. It was invaluable as a method of building personal and group power that then enabled the group to challenge the institutional power of housing agencies. As the community action project progressed, group members were in a process of actively creating themselves and struggling for new ways of being in the world through new kinds of conversations and social relationships. Some women had to assert their right to keep coming to the meetings to family members and neighbours. Others demonstrated new skills and abilities and took new leadership roles within their communities as a result of the advocacy activities. Many experienced new status (and more equal) relationships with people who had previously held positions of authority over them, such as politicians or Housing New Zealand employees. One senior member of the Tongan community who had observed the activities of the group said that because of the advocacy activities, the ‘hidden talents’ of many members had had a chance to emerge.

There is much empowering scope in the use of storytelling with communities at the economic and social margins, and more to understand of its application. Overall, results from the research project (Williams, 2001) demonstrate that while marginalized communities may be relatively powerless in relation to social and economic structures, they have considerable scope for exercising power and agency. Storytelling is an important tool in this process, which enables the conscious reconnection to and reconstitution of people’s identities. Newly found subject positions that are more enabling of agency and building community are conducive to the exercise of individual and group power that can challenge institutional power and dominant social discourses and structures.
REFERENCES
