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Brandon Kliewer
University of Georgia

Lorilee R. Sandmann
University of Georgia

Jihyun Kim
University of Georgia

Anthony Omerikwa
University of Georgia

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Toward Understanding Reciprocity in Community-University Partnerships: An Analysis of Theories of Power

Brandon Kliewer, University of Georgia, USA
Lorilee R. Sandmann, University of Georgia, USA
Jihyun Kim, University of Georgia, USA
Anthony Omerikwa, University of Georgia, USA

Abstract: *Reciprocity and mutuality are fundamental values and inherent goals of community-engaged partnerships. However, achieving reciprocal relationships demands an understanding of forms of power and differentials in power. With the work of major theorists and philosophers as its foundation, this paper provides a framework from which to analyze power as it relates to reciprocity in community engagement.*

Purpose

More than ever, universities and communities are developing symbiotic relationships to collaboratively address societal issues. Boyer (1990) terms such relationships community engagement. Such community-university relationships are highly complex; each member has particular resources (Bender, 1988). How resources are distributed and the way the distribution is negotiated—specifically reciprocity and mutuality—provides the context for this paper. A significant challenge that emerged from assessing elements of the 2006 Carnegie community-engaged classification applications was determining the basis for effective and reciprocal campus-community relationships. As Driscoll (2008) reports, “most institutions could only describe in vague generalities how they had achieved genuine reciprocity with their communities” (p. 41). Further analysis by Saltmarsh, Giles, Ward, and Buglione (2009), found that campuses that adopted Boyer’s scholarship categories tended to frame community engagement as “application to” a community, instead of engagement “with” communities, as an indicator of reciprocity.

Unpacking dimensions of power can provide an appropriate framework to articulate meaningful standards for defining reciprocal community-university partnerships. Whenever entities interact, power informs the relationship (Loomer, 1976). As Cervero and Wilson (2006) point out, power, interests, ethical commitment, and negotiation are central to engaged partnerships. This paper unpacks theoretical understandings of power from the perspectives of three theorists to respond to the question, How can theoretical understandings of power inform scholars’ and adult education administrators’ understandings of reciprocity and mutuality in community-university collaborations?

Mode of Inquiry

By drawing from theories that talk about power in diverse contexts, this analysis offers a unique approach to understanding reciprocity. This work overlays understandings of power, as it relates to reciprocity, across a multilevel and multidirectional framework that describes reciprocal relationships. This Relational Engagement Framework (Exhibit 1) is characterized by four types of interactions: (a) individual-to-individual, (b) individual-to-institution, (c)

institution-to-individual, and (d) institution-to-institution. The parameters of this Relational Engagement Framework were developed to add theoretical clarity to understandings of power within the existing literature of engagement.

Freire's Dialectical Perspective on Power and Reciprocity

Freire's (2000) view of power includes both a dialectical and a phenomenological stance. Power is not viewed as negative or positive; it is dialectical and thus exists everywhere people struggle. The phenomenological element of Freire's theory suggests that domination can be expressed as forms of power, technology, and ideology. From this perspective, power is intimately connected to the production and reproduction of various forms of knowledge. Although Freire did not use the term reciprocity, it can be inferred from the dialectical concept of power inherent within his pedagogical theory. His work suggests that to achieve reciprocity, the university-community partnership should not be oppressive; he also provides insights on building a mutual relationship. Freire's ideas across the relational engagement framework have a number of implications.

Dialectics that articulate relationships are informed by power. This characteristic applies in any quadrant of the relational framework. The dynamic that describes the student-teacher relationship in Freire's work provides an effective model for achieving high levels of reciprocity in university-community partnerships at the individual-to-individual level. Freire (1998) states that for the democratic educator, teaching is, above all, creating a situation in which the learners, who are epistemologically curious, will be able to appropriate the profound significance of the object so that, in the act of learning it they can know it and understand it. (pp. 66-67)

University partners need to approach engagement activities critically, specifically considering how to avoid maintaining oppressive social relations. Furthermore, engaged relationships at the individual-to-individual level need to ensure that both participants articulate the terms of the relationship and that knowledge is created on equal terms. Balancing legitimated knowledge and indigenous knowledge is a fundamental challenge of engagement. Understanding dialectical elements of power at the individual-to-individual level ensures that contributions from all parties are valued.

Glass (2001) states that "knowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterized by participatory, open communication focused around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluate consequences" (p. 19). Partnership should be premised on the idea that faculty are not ready-made knowledge deliverers; rather, community members have a legitimate stake as cocreators and consumers of knowledge. Further, Freire (2000) argues that "any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence" (p. 85). If individuals ground the development in authority, conclusions cannot be mutually accepted on terms of equality (Freire, 2000).

Freire (1998) often criticizes the university environment as "full of intolerance" that results from characteristics of scholarship: "Envy of the brilliance of others, fear of losing our small clique of admirers who are attracted by the knowledge that we supposedly illuminate, our personal insecurity..." (p. 100). To develop a mutual relationship and thus to support a reciprocal university-community partnership, a university should overcome these characteristics in a process that could result from conscientization (Freire, 2000).

To build a mutual relationship at the institution-to-individual level, universities need to

acknowledge how organizational subunits represent authority and legitimated knowledge. Authority often is attributed to various institutions across culture, race, and class. Effective institution-to-individual relationships will account for these elements while actively and openly addressing how marginalization can create power differentials. The extension of this logic suggests that the terms of engagement at the institution-to-individual level depend on accounting for the effects of marginalization.

Foucault's Perception of Power as Discipline and Reciprocity

This section applies specific elements of Michel Foucault's understanding of power to the context of community engagement. Foucauldian understandings of power will provide a basis for the conception of power as discipline, which can be used to analyze social technologies that inform power operating at different levels of the Relational Engagement Framework.

Foucault (1977) examines the power to regulate behavior through social technologies that include elements of surveillance/observation. Forms of power are organized and reproduced by creating a standard of "normal" that is strictly regulated and controlled through defining and enforcing the "norm." Social technologies understood in terms of surveillance/observation are used vigorously to enforce the "norm" through both external and internal forms of "governmentality" and self-imposed discipline. Marginalization occurs by self-identifying or being identified as "deviant" relative to the accepted norm. Power and privilege are bestowed on conforming political subjects.

The external regulation of norms is both perceived and actual. In some situations a subject can ascribe the power of "normalizing judgments"—that is, characteristics of the norm—to others. Individuals can thus create for themselves an identity based on the ideological "subject" that effectively marginalizes their position of power. This type of ascribed power is a particular threat when forming reciprocal university-community partnerships.

Normalizing judgment does not require any differentials in power. The ever-changing and free-flowing understanding of "normal" regulates subjects' behaviors. The normalizing power operates in two ways at the individual-to-individual level. First, normalizing behavior focuses power between individuals through requiring adherence to a particular range of conduct. Second, normalizing power at this level is defined by societal forces, not by particular individuals. Individual interactions are thus forced to comply with standards of normality that are constructed not individually but collectively. Within the context of engagement this might mean that reciprocity, though defined at the individual-to-individual level, is limited to protocols that conform to societal standards of normality. Thus a person's socioeconomic status, gender, race, or educational level can produce an unintended power differential.

Normalizing power regulates behavior by defining and enforcing a particular norm. Acknowledging nonconformity or deviance from the norm produces power. However, acting within the norm is not enough to organize power; one must have enough influence to have others recognize deviance. Production of power thus rests on being able to illustrate deviance in others.

In most relationships designed to maintain elements of engagement, power is not produced in individuals at the individual-to-institution level. Institutions are usually best understood as defining the norms that can define deviance and subsequently organize operations of power. A single individual rarely has power to enforce and independently define norms that can label institutions as "deviant."

As briefly mentioned, institutions guide and regulate norms. The individual acting within

the system regulates behaviors according to the norms created by the institution. An institution's power to regulate behavior is thus a very significant concern for communicating reciprocity. The expectations and procedures of institutions regulate and channel forms of power not only by their mere existence but by the way they are enforced on individuals. Norms often develop around how individuals should interact and comply with institutional procedures. These informal and formal expectations create forms of power for the institution. As a result, when university-community partners are establishing the parameters of reciprocity, institutional norms of the university can serve to marginalize individual community partners.

At the institution-to-institution level, power is generally ascribed through forms of surveillance. Institutions that observe and enforce institutional relationships can produce power by strictly regulating both formal and unofficial norms of operation. Powerful institutions can also diffuse power by relaxing some norms of operation and allowing other institutions to self-regulate their practices. Understanding the university and the community as independent institutions demonstrates how institution-to-institution relationships need to account for forms of power. Due to the contextual nature of engagement activities, universities can easily and unconsciously label "communities" as nonconforming institutions. The community origin of engagement issues can be both a strength and weakness, but regardless, the power dynamics in the relationship need to be identified in order to effectively promote reciprocity.

Rawls's Perspective on Power as Justice and Reciprocity

Philosopher John Rawls (1999a, 1999b) provides a third perspective on power and reciprocity. The reciprocity inherent in Rawls's theory plays a crucial role in defining principles for developing a just society. Rawls's theoretical structure thus can be used to analyze the philosophical requirements of reciprocity.

Rawls's (1999a, 1999b) accounts of justice and the theoretical structure employed to account for what justice requires are extremely complex. However, in order to extend Rawls's understanding of reciprocity to the context of engagement, we present a basic overview of his theory. Rawls's philosophical structure defines the requirements of justice through a three-stage process in which moral intuitions—"considered judgments"—are examined in the impartial "original position." Those considered judgments that achieve consensus, or "reflective equilibrium," are used to define the principles, and thus the requirements, of justice.

Rawls (1999a) attempts to provide an account of "perfect procedural justice" (p. 74), taking an approach in contrast to the view that justice is known and that institutions can be arranged to meet the standards of justice (to each according to merit, to each according to virtue, to each according to wealth, etc.). Rawls's procedural account of justice can provide a theoretical account of power and how power differentials impact university-community partnerships.

Rawls's account of justice provides a systematic approach giving both a specific and a general understanding of reciprocity. Reciprocity can be understood narrowly within the operation of the original position, and this approach suggests that reciprocity dictates the development of reflective equilibrium. However, Rawls's procedural account of justice can be characterized as a reciprocal relationship between all just persons. Simply applying his theory to the Relational Engagement Framework would thus be an incomplete analysis of the theory.

Under Rawls's theoretical arrangement, as individuals interact and define engaged relationships, their communication should be on equal terms. The process is procedural in the sense that the initial stages of engaged relationships establish the basis for maintaining high

levels of reciprocity. Rawls's approach attempts to acknowledge some forms of power by allowing only reasonable parties to define the elements of reciprocity. However, in order to capture the complexities of Rawls's procedural account of justice, the theoretical process of justice must be constructed within the context of engagement.

It is important to understand that this theory will not in itself provide an account of "just" engaged learning, research, and partnership. The goal of this work is not to define the requirements of justice in engagement but to identify a theoretical gap within existing engagement literature. Rawls's account of justice has the potential to provide a philosophical understanding of engagement, particularly of reciprocity as an aspect of engagement. It operates as a systemic or meta-level theory to capture all elements of the Relational Engagement Framework. Mechanistically applying Rawls's account of justice to the Relational Engagement Framework would be a disservice to the budding theoretical and philosophical literature surrounding engagement.

Conclusion

The analysis of power and reciprocity represented as a Relational Engagement Framework offers an informed way of thinking deeply about issues of power and therefore has implications for the study and practice of community engagement. The power analysis of each relationship and the concomitant varying definitions of mutuality and reciprocity provide a basis for enhanced efforts toward more democratic and reciprocal community-engaged practices for both the community and the campus partners. This discussion also illuminates the need for community engagement researchers to grapple with the underlying philosophical and theoretical complexities. Research questions to further advance thinking about the issues of power and reciprocity include: From an epistemological standpoint, is it even possible to maintain authentic reciprocal relationships? How do the dynamics of race, gender, culture, authority, and class align to achieve reciprocity within the mission of community partnerships? Can maintaining high levels of reciprocity become an issue of justice? If so, how is one to define what justice requires within the context of service-learning and engaged scholarship? How does one design empirical research based on power analysis?

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Exhibit 1. Relational Engagement Framework

