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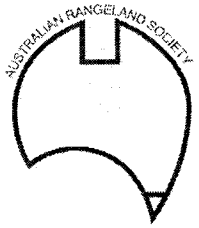

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WHERE DOES THE POWER LIE? LANDHOLDERS PERSPECTIVES ABOUT COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LAND MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of landholders regarding power relationships within community participation are highlighted in this paper. The two major conceptualisations of power are used to analyse power relationships within existing government rangeland management programs. Within the dominant perspective, when power is viewed as a capacity, landholders expressed a desire to have more power and influence over government decision-making. However, this study revealed anomalies within this perspective of power. Power is dynamic and individual relationships are fundamentally important to landholders, indicating the alternative perspective. Landholders do not necessarily act to maximise their power. Rather, they choose participatory processes which ensure their interests are protected. Both conceptualizations of power can assist in improving participatory approaches in rangeland management.

INTRODUCTION

In the Australian rangelands, the trend towards community participation is evident in the literature as well as in government policy and guidelines (Commonwealth of Australia 1999). However, participatory approaches are undertaken with little understanding of the underpinning concepts. Power is highlighted as one of the key dimensions of community participation (Chambers 1997; Guijt and Shah 1998; Pretty 1999). Hence, improving the theoretical understanding of power and how power influences the relationships between government agencies and landholders could enhance participatory activities.

This paper focuses on the perceptions of rangeland people regarding power relationships within community participation in government natural resource management and other land management programs. Interviews were undertaken with landholders and government staff, primarily in south-west Queensland, but with some in central Queensland, western New South Wales and the Gascoyne-Murchison region of Western Australia. Rangeland people rarely discussed power explicitly, yet power issues are often implicit.

Because power relations were rarely discussed explicitly, research included observation of participants, and techniques to encourage reflection. A typology with different levels of power sharing in participation was presented to landholders to stimulate discussion – Pretty's model (Table 1). This method highlighted that people in rangeland management were well aware of power divisions and indeed used them to advance their own interests. For them, the meaning of power fitted into one of the two main conceptualisations.

Defining power

Different understandings of power have developed in two main traditions – the dominant tradition is epitomized by the works of Habermas, and the alternative tradition is epitomized by Foucault's writings. The Habermasian understanding is that power is a quantitative capacity, an entity which can be traded and shared, where power is seen as repressive. Foucault's conceptualization is that power manifests in the actions of individuals, inherent in all communication, and does not exist outside of relations between people. Power is viewed as inevitable, with both positive and negative dimensions (Foucault 1980b, 1988; Hindess 1996). Simplistically, Foucault focuses on the individual and micro-scale, while Habermas

focuses on the collective and macro-scale. This study reveals the complexity of power relationships and suggests that both traditions can develop understanding about community participation.

Defining participation in relation to power

Participation is used in this research, as in common parlance, to simply mean involvement or attendance – it is an umbrella term meaning the range of processes through which local communities are involved and influence government programs. However, the meaning of terms such as participation, consultation and partnerships are inconsistent, with definitions varying across states, over time and between disciplines.

In the development and agricultural extension literature, the only "genuine" participation is that which equally shares decision-making power between government agencies and local people. Various typologies use power sharing to differentiates between types of participation – for example Arnstein's classic work (1969), as well as Cornwall (1995) and Pretty's (1995b). These all highlight the desirability of transferring control to local people. The literature and government policy emphasises the need to empower the weak, women, minorities and vulnerable in society. This is a Habermasian view with the dichotomies of "powerful" and "powerless", focusing on the macro view of a formulaic approach to participation.

Table 1 Levels of participation

Arnstein's model	Pretty's model	Cornwall's model
Manipulation	Manipulative participation (such as a Board of representatives with tokenistic power)	Co-option
Therapy		
Informing	Passive participation (where local people receive information from government)	Co-operation
Consulting (e.g. attitude survey)	Participation by consultation (where locals provide information to government)	Consultation
Placating (representative on a Board or committee)	Participation for material goals (where locals receive material incentives such as money)	
	Functional Participation (to achieve goals of external agency)	Collaboration
Partnership	Interactive participation (where local people can influence government decisions)	Co-learning
Delegated power		
Citizen control	Self-mobilisation (where the power rests with the local community)	Collective action

(Adapted from Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995b, 1999; Cornwall 1995)

While the concept of power underpins these typologies, power relationships are rarely outlined explicitly, either in the participation literature or in practice. The participation literature suggests that power is an important issue, yet concepts about the theory underpinning the conceptualisation of power are poorly developed. Power definitions and issues are often implicit in discussion, and the theoretical traditions are rarely mentioned.

Pretty's typology in agriculture does not define power explicitly. However his meaning seems to fit with the dominant conception – where power is a quantitative phenomena, it is the capacity to act, a commodity which can be traded. Pretty says (1995b, 1999) that some people "have no power" indicating an assumption that power can be possessed. He also mentions "distributions of wealth and power" which implies that power is a quantitative capacity which can be acquired or shared. This view is similar to the dominant tradition as epitomized by Habermas (1987, 1996) and many others, who see power as the ability of a person to "do" something, such as influence decisions and bring about outcomes; or the ability of a person to have power "over" others.

In practice, power is not commonly discussed. Perhaps this is because the theory is not well understood. Also, it is probably because power issues are difficult topic for people to discuss openly, usually fraught

with emotions. For all participants, both agency facilitators and landholders, discussions about power usually mean questioning one's personal motives for involvement and undertaking consultation or participation activities. Also, such discussions can require some level of honesty and trust within relationships and between individuals in the group.

Landholder's perceptions of power and participation

In this study, landholders identified a lack of trust and "the old bush suspicion of government" as a major problem in south-western Queensland. Landholders sometimes trusted individual government staff, but actions of the agency often shattered trust. They feared what happened to information given to the agency over time, especially as staff and government policies seemed fairly transient. Mistrust developed from landholder's perceptions that: they are not heard; local knowledge is not incorporated; government does not want to understand; and participation exercises are a pretence. For example:

- They assume you have plenty of time to come to meetings ... most of them have never been out here, they have no idea of distance, or of anything else out here ...
- They don't try and understand our language, yet at the same time they expect us to understand their language ... we talk two different languages completely
- I think they deliberately do it (use jargon and technical language) to lose people
- I've seen it [participation] put into practice, they [government] just take it over, seems like another public relations exercise where they get control of the direction, they don't even give you a chance to control it.
- Everything is done under the guise of public consultation; if the government goes to enough people, someone will give them the answer they want and then they can justify their proposal by saying these people wanted it, and also say we consulted.

If mistrust is to be overcome, the level of power shared espoused by government needs to be consistent with the practice of participation. Transparency and honesty within relationships is also needed for trust to develop between landholders and government staff. The comments of landholders indicate intricate interactions between communication and power and between knowledge and power.

Knowledge and power influence each other according to Foucault and others – "it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (Sarup 1988 p.82). This conceptualisation suggests that the source from which knowledge originates fundamentally influences the power relationships. In Australian rangelands, some landholders "would rather look over the fence than listen to the experts." When government expertise is not recognised by landholder this contributes to a loss of power for government in terms of Foucault's framework. Thus, power is not absolute, it is strongly linked to knowledge. Likewise, when local landholder knowledge is under-utilised by government, this contributes to loss of power within the local community. Landholders frequently complain that their experience and knowledge is not valued. Government structures and communication styles still fail to incorporate landholder's knowledge with scientific understanding, sometimes unintentionally. Lack of trust and poor communication between agencies and landholders exacerbates to the problem. However, landholders interviewed were more motivated to participate in rangeland management programs when they had a high degree of power sharing. The trend of increasing community participation and governments sharing power with local people is appreciated by most landholders.

While landholders wanted participation where they shared in decision-making power, they do not always want this type of participation. Several existing rangeland projects did share the power of decision-making, one of the levels which landholders considered as "ideal". However, some thought that there was too much participation expected of them, and that over-consultation was an issue. Others expressed strong opinions that the government should play a major role:

- government is elected to govern, and sometimes they should just make some decision. On more complex and difficult issues it is important to consult [e.g. vegetation clearing]; but government should not consult on everything. It is a waste of time to consult on everything.
- I think a lot of times... growers need some assistance and direction, need some guidance ... it's not that they are not enthusiastic, but they... don't have the skills in organising and obtaining information that is going to be helpful ... we are notorious for going off the track ... it is beneficial that they have some sort of guidance

Sometimes, simply receiving information was seen as appropriate (Pretty's level 2), and in some circumstances landholders said that providing information (Pretty's level 3) was the appropriate level. Yet the typologies imply that more participation and a greater degree of power sharing are always better. For the landholders there was no single "ideal" level of power to aspire to, as promoted by Habermas and others ascribing to the dominant conception of power. When asked about the ideal approach for participatory landholders said that this was the wrong question – "it is horses for courses".

Landholders emphasised the contextual nature of power, fluctuating levels of power within projects and the importance of the personalities of the individuals involved. The fluidity of power was explained within specific projects where several levels of power existed, and these levels fluctuated over time and at different stages. This is illustrated in Figure 1 and in comments such as:

- "Landcare...starts back with participation for material incentives (level 4) and builds towards level 7 (self-reliant participation) from there".
- "Bestprac spends more time at the 7 stage" (self-mobilisation), than many other projects; however "it begins at 5" (functional participation following government goals). As one government officer said "you get them together to a group, you go in there the first time and you've got the goals and the function of the group ... then they participate in saying what their needs are", which is level 3 (participation by consultation). The group often then moves to 6 (interactive participation) and "Once it gets rolling then it becomes self reliant".

This project started at 7 (self-mobilisation) when initiated by the community and moved through 3 (participation by consultation), 6 (interactive participation), 2 (passive participation), before concluding at 5 (functional agency participation) with the government setting the goals, taking over running the project and taking the credit for the project, a common occurrence according to landholders.

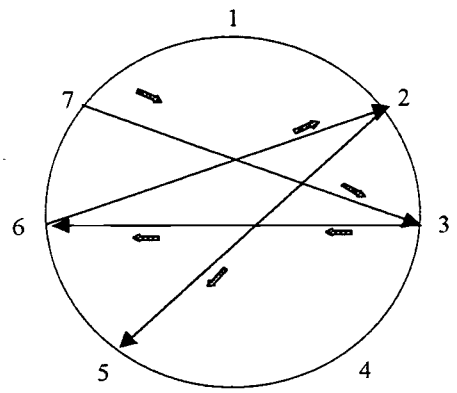

Figure 1 Fluctuating power

One of the most frequent comments by landholders was that the personality and attitude of the individuals was fundamentally important in participatory activities. Government facilitators needed to be:
someone enthusiastic, a good listener, can communicate well and not an overbearing personality
However, some government people were accused of being arrogant and:
inclined to talk down to you all the time as if you are from out of space; they have it all up here, they are real super intelligent and you are a nut.

The importance of the personalities and communications skills of agency staff was often not recognized by government. People tend to be employed and rewarded for their technical skills, and not for their interpersonal skills and ability for liaise effectively with landholders. Performance criteria need to be changed to reflect the skills required for participation if this role is to be improved.

Fluidity of power levels and power relationships between individuals indicate a conceptualisation of power focused on the micro aspects of projects. Such an understanding of power fits more with Foucault's (Flyvbjerg 2001) concept of power, which contrasts with the dominant tradition. Being a Foucauldian perspective, it sees all individuals as vehicles of power, thus disrupting the commonly discussed dichotomies, such as macro/micro and powerful/powerless. This conception allows us to:

- "shift our concentration from the center and national institutions such as the state, not because this enables the powerless to speak and be heard, but because those macro-spheres of authority are not necessarily the only focal conductors of power" and in this conception
- "knowledge is culturally, socially and politically produced and is continuously reformulated as a powerful normative construct." (Kothari 2001 p.141).

A Foucauldian analysis obviously has benefits by emphasizing the dynamic and contextual nature of power. As Foucault and others (Gibson-Graham 1995; Hailey 2001) argue, the formulation of universals and "ideals" can actually reinforce domination and limit the opportunities for solutions. However, the dominant approach, as explained through the works of Habermas, has useful insights for participation.

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that both a macro and micro analysis are needed to understand the complexity of power relationships. As such, both traditions of power, the dominant view as epitomized by Habermas, and the alternative conceptualization as espoused by Foucault, can contribute to improving participatory approaches. Pretty's typology is aligned with the dominant conceptualization. It highlights that different types of participation allow different levels of power sharing, the macro perspective. Power sharing was found to be important to landholders as many are motivated by being able to influence government decision-making.

A Foucauldian analysis provides insights about the micro aspects, such as the fluidity and contextual nature of participation. Here it is the relationships between individuals which are fundamental to participation. Emerging points from this study were that

- · landholders do not always want to share power in all aspects and all stages of a project
- · power levels fluctuate during projects
- · individual personalities and the context of power relationships are vitally important.

The implications for designing participatory processes are that it is important to negotiate with all of the participants, which level of power sharing is appropriate at each stage of the project. The fluctuating nature of power means that any evaluation can really only capture a snap-shot in time and space. There is no one "ideal" participatory approach which is appropriate for rangeland management - formulas and principles can assist our understanding but these need to be tempered by a sensitivity to context and the nuances of individual relationships.

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