

44. Foucauldian power and resistance

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Outline of the topic

This entry examines a Foucauldian conceptualization of power and resistance within the context of digital mental health innovation. Innovation can either pertain to the ongoing improvement of a pre-existing product or the creation of a new product, service, or business model. From a Foucauldian perspective, innovation is necessarily intertwined with power insofar as it necessitates both management and employees negotiating the meaning of change. The innovation discussed here involved the creation of a new digital mental health management tool. This innovation emerged out of grassroots-level interactions within a social enterprise that employs individuals with mental health conditions (MHCs).

Conceptual overview and discussion

From a Foucauldian perspective, the dynamics of power and resistance are constantly present within organizations. Research conducted by Thomas and colleagues on change innovation with senior and middle managers in a workshop held as part of a cultural change programme at a telecommunications company illustrated the constant dynamic between power and resistance to change within organizations. When senior managers attempted to impose change upon employees, the latter expressed resistance by challenging and negotiating the meanings of change innovation held by senior managers, thus co-constructing the meanings associated with change. While change innovation is often imposed from above, it can also be driven from below. Within the context of (ill) health and, more specifically, MHCs, Foucauldian notions of power and resistance help to unpack the ways in which societal stigma emerges and imposes itself upon people with MHCs, which, in turn, makes them subject to the power of medical professionals. More recently, nascent forms of resistance to this power have emerged in social movements and advocates. However, there have hitherto been rare instances of mental health training being designed at the grassroots, that is, from the perspective of individuals with MHCs. In Foucauldian

terms, this means that individuals with MHCs are empowered to create their own training, rather than managers or health professionals imposing this upon them, which, in turn, expresses resistance against longstanding mental health stigmatization. This is discussed more concretely here in the context of digital mental health training within mental health management.

Application: change innovation and the power-resistance dynamic

The following empirical case serves to illustrate how to operate with the power-resistance dynamic in such a way that engenders positive change within the context of designing and initiating mental health training. The empirical case study is based on a collaboration with a social enterprise in the north-west of England.

To support the development and design of the tool, preliminary research on mental health management in the workplace was conducted. The empirical data collected provided new insights into how people's mental health was affected by the lockdowns and the shift to remote working during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The tool was developed and designed with these circumstances in mind, recognizing the challenges associated with social isolation, compassion fatigue, burnout, and stigma as well as working remotely. The lived experiences of the employees with MHCs directly shaped the content, including, among other things, body-mind wellbeing, compassion fatigue, burnout, and mental health stigma. These participants deemed it important that the tool's visuals, graphics, and stories were positive and focused on individuals' strengths rather than their weaknesses. In this respect, both the development and design of the tool illustrated the countervailing discourses and hegemonic ideas associated with MHCs: stigmatization. The tool was designed around the topics that the participants deemed to be most relevant to their own mental health and wellbeing challenges and by so doing empowered their own individual experience. This was done to counteract the way in which learning tools are ordinarily designed by mental health professionals or in traditional e-learning courses, which require the participants to complete all sections in a specific order.

This led to the design being grounded in the notion of a wellbeing garden, which

connected to the themes of nurturance, growth and the healthy maintenance of one's wellbeing. This idea of a peaceful wellbeing garden also stands in marked contrast to both the pressures that many of us face at work and the power dynamic between employees and management.

The e-learning tool was collaboratively developed by researchers and service users and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The entire project testifies to the empowerment of a population who have experienced a long history of suppression and disempowerment. As such, this digital innovation model demonstrated how these individuals were able to resist social stigma and the medicalized view of MHCs and disease by designing a learning tool based on the metaphor of a wellbeing garden.

Critical summary

The Foucauldian conceptualization of power and resistance and change through innovation demonstrates how grassroots mental health management training development can serve to promote and enhance innovation within the workplace. In the case presented here, this was done via a digital innovation within mental health care for specific actors who needed an innovative change to better manage their mental health and wellbeing and

stigmatization. Future research could consider the need for resistance when encountering the weaker power positions of marginalized groups, as this could provide fertile ground for further innovation and progress as well as related research programs.

Further readings

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- Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness & civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. Vintage Books, Random House.
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