

What is this project about?

This study was an analysis of the power of discourse that positions development practitioners in the course of development work in a non-profit organisation in Cape Town. The research studied the interactions of four female development practitioners, who facilitated workshops on health and human rights using REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) development methodology. The researcher assisted with the planning of workshops in return for practitioners' participation in the research.

The aims of the research were to find out:

- What discourses inform practitioners' interactions and how do interactions inform discourses?
- What role do discourses play in practitioners' interactions and what role do interactions play in shaping discourses?

The research

After an initial meeting brokered by the UCT Knowledge Co-op, the researcher began participating in weekly planning meetings and observing workshops facilitated by the development practitioners.

After approximately 6 months, the researcher carried out interviews with four practitioners. Observations were recorded in a field note journal and interviews were transcribed verbatim. These texts were interpreted using critical discourse analysis. From these texts the researcher identified dominant discourses that operated to both enable and constrain the work of development practitioners in their attempts to bring about change in the communities in which they work.



What you need to know:

- 1) Just because projects are designed to level power relations between development practitioners and development participants, does not necessarily mean that this happens in practice. As a result of such projects development workers may unexpectedly gain positions of power (e.g. to allocate jobs or income) rather than building more equal relationships and challenging the status quo.
- 2) For students, volunteer involvement with an NGO can be an ideal way of finding a relevant thesis topic & of gaining access to informants.

The research findings

The study found that development practitioners prefer development projects that can generate an income for workshop participants. The unintended result of this can be that capitalist values are supported which builds up an economic system that exploits the poor.

If funders insist that practitioners use a specific method (e.g. REFLECT) this limits the way in which they can facilitate workshops. Further, the NGO is monitored by funders through reports and registers, submitted monthly, to ensure they adhere to REFLECT. This puts practitioners in a hierarchy below funders and below development theorists.

In the end, enforcing such discourses and development methodologies can constrain rather than enable development practitioners. Their ability to effect change gets limited to that which conforms to others' notions of how their projects should be run. There is a gap between theory and practice. As a result, developing new theories may be of limited use

if applied to all groups regardless of context. The focus should be on growing meaningful relationships between development organisations and local communities, rather than making funding conditional on using one particular development approach.

Using the research

Development theorists and academics, in producing theories to improve people's lives, may need to re-think their place in the power structure and their role in shaping power relations. Writing about development in terminology with which most people are not familiar – particularly if English is an additional language – gives the speakers of these words status and positions them above others. This may make it more difficult for people involved in development to build more equal relationships with one another.

Further research could be conducted into the role of language in shaping power relations in development settings.

The project was completed **in December 2012**.

Want to know more?

Research was carried out by Teresa Perez, supervised by Prof Johann Graaff of the Department of Sociology. This summary is based on the study 'How do discourses enable and constrain the power of development practitioners in interactions within the Women's Circle.' The thesis will be available on the Co-op website.

Keywords: Discourse, critical discourse analysis, development, REFLECT, power, language, volunteering.

To **reference** this Project Portrait, please cite the author as UCT Knowledge Co-op.

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The Knowledge Co-Op at the University of Cape Town

The UCT Knowledge Co-op aims to make it easier for community partners to access UCT's skills, resources and professional expertise. It helps initiate joint projects that benefit both the community partner and the university. The Co-op links community groups with appropriately qualified staff and students at UCT, and supports both partners throughout the project – from initial planning to final product.

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