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How do Social Dominance and Minority Influence affect the Collaboration of Refugee Services?

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Abstract

Social Dominance Theory has problematic implications for humanitarian work: It suggests that stakeholders of the humanitarian sector collectively maintain the social hierarchies that disadvantage the very minorities that they are supposed to empower. Minority Influence Theory, on the other hand, suggests that social innovation in the humanitarian sector can emerge from the bottom-up, thus against the grain of social hierarchies. This thesis explores for the refugee service sector of Auckland, New Zealand, (a) if former refugees are indeed marginalised within the inter-organisational context that is supposed to empower them, (b) if this has detrimental effects on the sector's performance, and (c) if fostering minority influence might alleviate such effects. The first research question was approached through a stakeholder analysis, which revealed that the social hierarchies within the refugee service sector indeed mirror the marginalisation of former refugees in general New Zealand society. Then, stories of positive and negative incidents of collaboration in the sector were analysed through the lenses of Social Dominance Theory and Minority Influence Theory. A thematic analysis of negative incidents of collaboration gathered accounts of discrimination through disregard, as well as legitimising myths. The latter concerned the inaccessibility of services, confounding participation with collaboration, voluntarism as unambiguously positive, feelings of indebtedness among former refugees, and the false belief in opportunities in New Zealand. These findings support the idea that social dominance perpetuates social hierarchies in the refugee service sector and thereby negatively affects its performance. However, the assumptions of Social Dominance Theory concerning behavioural asymmetry did not match the data, which indicates different root causes of social dominance than claimed by the theory's authors. Stories of successful collaboration involved factors that facilitate minority influence, such as finding consistency, appealing to common values, enough time, bottom-up accountability in the form of community ownership, and trust. This suggests that facilitating minority influence in the Auckland refugee service sector simultaneously facilitates collaboration. Social Dominance Theory and Minority Influence Theory proved to be instrumental to analysing problems within the inter-organisational context of refugee services and for finding indications for future research and better practice.

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