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ARTICLE**

Consumer rep wanted: must speak for all of us? A discussion paper on “representatives” - by Wanda Bennetts in ongoing collaboration with Flick Grey, Cath Roper, Ellie Fossey, Vrinda Edan and other members of PsychActionTraining group.

Introduction

Often when consumers speak publicly, we are expected to speak as a “consumer representative.” However, little thought is given to what it might mean to be “representative”. There are a number of challenges, including:

- different ideas of what it means to be representative, or people/organisations not really having thought through what it means to be representative;
- the word being used quite loosely or as a substitute for other types of consumer leadership and participation;
- ethical questions about whether or not consumers should even seek to be representative;
- a legitimate concern to avoid ‘speaking for’ other consumers in ways that risk silencing their voices; and
- inadequate resources for consumers to be able to act as representatives, if this is desired.

The purpose of this paper is to tease out some of the complexities surrounding the issue of representation so we can come to a better understanding of these issues. This paper does not seek to create consensus or provide a position. Instead, the intention is to highlight the issues and create a basis for reflection and dialogue. Also note that this paper has not sought representative views, although several people have contributed to the development of it.

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Definitions

The Collins dictionary defines a representative as:

- a person or thing that represents another or others
- a person who represents and tries to sell the products or services of a firm, esp a travelling salesman. Often shortened to: rep
- a typical example
- a person representing a constituency in a deliberative, legislative, or executive body ...

(<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/representative>)

All of these definitions are relevant to our work – firstly, consumer “representatives” are typically expected to represent other consumers. This should involve consumers having a say in who represents them and there being means and resources for communication back and forth between the group and their representative. For example, if a consumer advisory group chooses someone to be their “representative” and this person has opportunity and resources to consult with the group and to communicate back and forth, then s/he might be able to represent the group.

Secondly, in some ways we are “selling” consumer perspective, we are “representing” consumer perspective. Thirdly, we are often expected to speak as a “representative, typical consumer”, and our contributions may be rejected if we are not seen to be “typical” (or not like “our” consumers). “Representativeness” has different meanings and is often used against consumer workers who may



be accused of “not being representative”. One understanding of “representativeness” – more common in quantitative research – is whether a view/opinion is “typical” or “representative” of a defined group of people. This view of “representativeness” relies on the assumption that if a group of people are sufficiently alike, then their views/opinions are also likely to be similar or the same. Using this assumption is neither accurate nor useful when considering the contribution of consumer perspective in organisations. The other – which is more common in qualitative research – focuses on the views/opinions/experiences themselves, rather than on whether the people expressing them are “typical” of a group. In other words, views/opinions/experiences on an issue/topic are acknowledged as diverse, so that it is considered important to maximise the range of

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views/opinions/ experiences that one can draw on in order to “represent” those views/opinions/experiences. To capture the breadth of views needed to be “representative”, resources are needed for extensive engagement and dialogue.

When “representation” or “representativeness” is questioned, there is often an unspoken issue/agenda that is about power and undermining the credibility of the person(s) and/or their views (Happell and Roper, 2006). Interestingly, this is also evident in gender relations, interprofessional relations and staff-management relations, as well as in consumer-non consumer relations in services. These kinds of dynamics are always most potent for the least powerful in any of these relationships.

The final definition of representation is a more formal, political idea. Political theorist Edmund Burke elaborates on this final definition, suggesting that a political representative shouldn’t simply communicate the wishes of those who have elected them, but also use their own judgement, even when their own views do not reflect the majority of the electorate:

...it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

-*The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke. Volume I.* London: Henry G. Bohn. 1854. pp. 446–8, quoted on Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representative_democracy.

Questions:

- How do you define representation?
- Is there a definition of representation that is more useful or more ethical in the context of consumer perspective?
- If the goal is to get a sampling of views, how many views would be considered to be sufficiently “representative”? How do we know what is “enough”?



Context

The consumer movement provides **expertise** to the mental health sector. Representation is just one way of doing this. Other ways of providing expertise are through education, systemic advocacy or the provision of consultancy, to name just a few.

When “representative views” are sought through consultation, there must be adequate resourcing to enable an ethical and effective process. Too often, consultations are approached in a way that sees them as a default and ‘the easy way out’. There also

needs to be accountability, so that advice received from a consultation is acted upon, unless there are compelling reasons not to. All too often, “consumer representatives” are consulted with, but no action is taken as a result of these efforts, thereby substantially undermining the process. Organisations often leap into representative mechanisms as they are relatively cheap and easy to set up and they tick the participation box. The organisation also retains control over who is selected and can ignore expertise that may not be welcome.

Sometimes representation can merely be the word that is used, with no real thought or sense to the meaning of the word. By functioning on ‘automatic pilot’ over the years, people have come to ask for a consumer ‘rep’ without much thought of what that really means in practice or in principle.

It is important to recognise that representation is just one role or function. It has its place like other functions and needs to be selected as the most appropriate way of doing the work when this is the case. Representation may be sought when we want to know either the most common view of consumers, or the range of common views, for example. But the provision of expertise is a different function from representation - experts can agree or disagree; indeed, disagreement can be a valid

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and useful way to grow views, critique arguments, and develop novel strategies and solutions for moving forward on issues.

Representative mechanisms are limited in what they do for the consumer movement. For a start, they can be discriminatory (because only some people are allowed to participate as “representatives”). They also do not of themselves lead to capacity building, broader development of consumer leadership, critical mass or the embedding of consumer perspective in all endeavors. If there are no resources attached, then the “representative” is put in a bind because all their consulting may have to be done voluntarily or within paid time (of which there is usually precious little). Someone in this position is then vulnerable to being seen as “unrepresentative” by both service users and by the organisation. This leaves consumer “representatives” at times in an unenviable position. Conversely, it may provide an opportunity for a consumer to feel s/he has the only important view and this person is able to put the view across under the guise of being representative.

Questions:

- When you ask for a representative, what are your expectations?
- Do you usually think about the most appropriate way to facilitate consumer leadership and participation or do you generally just ask for a representative without thinking much about what you are really wanting?

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Philosophical/ethical/political questions

Consumers working in the field are generally employed by an organisation, or put themselves forward for selection, and become recognised as “representatives” by the mere fact they are employed/selected.

People doing consumer perspective work can face an ethical dilemma in positions where they are understood to be representing or pressured to represent others. Do the people being represented know that they are being represented or what is being represented? There is also a principle governing the practice of representation regarding the person doing the

representing being selected by those they are representing. This is mostly **not** the case in mental health consumer perspective work. Consumers working in the field are generally employed by an organisation, or put themselves forward for selection, and become recognised as “representatives” by the mere fact they are employed/selected.

Questions:

- How should consumer representatives be selected?
- Are selection processes entirely open and transparent?
- What are the implications for consumer workers in organisations being employed by the organisation and then being asked to be representative?

A further issue for consumers as representatives is the potential danger of replicating what has at times been done in the system – people speaking on behalf of others. There are people who use services who do not want others to speak on their behalf, even if the “representatives” may express views closely resembling their own thoughts. Therefore, it is essential that representatives and organisations are very cognizant of:

- not speaking on behalf of others, unless they have expressly been given permission to do so;
- whether the representative is comfortable, ethically able and adequately resourced to speak on behalf of others;
- whether consumers want anyone else representing them.

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Where a “representative” is aware of the ethical dilemmas involved, they may choose to work in ways that clearly reflect an ethical stance, for example, sending out their own meeting minutes to networks to try to keep the movement engaged with the work. While this might principally be one way communication, it is at least transparent and others are able to know what is happening if they are interested. Other things consumer workers might do include:

- drawing on their own experiences;
- speaking with colleagues and peers constantly;
- hearing from consumers using services to keep a finger on the pulse;
- drawing on information gathered via surveys, research, books, newsletters, etc;
- transparently declare their position by noting things like – “I hear many consumers saying ...”, or “I have heard a few people say ..., but most seem to have a different opinion”, or “My own opinion on this is ...”, or “the info we gathered from ‘x’ says ...”, or “the literature on that states ...”, or “My colleagues and peers have said ... and I agree (or disagree) ...”



If the aim is for a representative view to be gained, there needs to be processes, time and money put aside so that this can be done properly. If it is expected to happen in a few minutes here and there within the usual working time of the 'reps', it does not allow for a process that adequately reflects what is trying to be achieved. In addition, if 'reps' are simply attending one meeting with no other formal time or links to do this work, it can make a mockery of the notion.

Questions:

- If you are expected to act as a representative (or expecting someone to act as a representative), what kinds of resources and practices would you need to have in place for this to be possible, both ethically and practically?
- Are you aware of the power relations behind a "representative" way of working?

Representation can be seen at times to be about trying to get a consensus view. However, there are crucially important alternatives to consensus including:

- (1) Even if only one person holds a certain view or has a certain experience, that still matters (although it shouldn't be mistaken for being the majority view – we all know of instances where the squeaky wheel gets the oil);
- (2) Consumer leaders can build up a form of collective expertise over time, building on their own lived experience and speaking extensively with other consumers, even if not specifically consulting. This often results in a capacity to speak of a diversity of consumer views, in a grounded way;
- (3) Expertise may have a truth that stems not from being a majority view, but from deep thought and consideration, of an individual or a collective. This type of expertise is respected in other fields (e.g. a respected psychiatrist who differs from her colleagues), but often gets marginalised when coming from consumer leaders. Instead, we are urged to be "representative".

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Questions:

- Should all views be condensed down to a single "representative" view? Why?
- Are you aware of practices of silencing?
- How do you deal with issues that are raised, but are not "representative"?

Representation is not generally what is expected of others from different disciplines, although it should be equally an issue for every member of a committee/team/group discussion. While the question "What do consumers think?" is frequently asked, people rarely ask "What do doctors think?" or "What do nurses think?" Although this may come from a well intentioned starting point that shows an interest in what consumers have to say, an underlying assumption that accompanies this question is that consumers can, should and do represent other consumers much of the time.



This is an important issue as consumers are not a homogenous group any more than are people from other disciplines and backgrounds. There are many views shaped by many experiences. It is interesting that there are no guides on how to

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select a doctor/nurse/occupational therapist/social worker/psychologist etc. to be on a committee or share their point of view. Other disciplines are not generally asked to be representative in the same way consumers are - we don't generally ask other staff to represent all others of their discipline e.g. every time a nurse speaks or a doctor speaks, we don't expect that they are speaking on behalf of all nurses or doctors.

It would appear that people in these groups/disciplines do not trouble themselves nearly enough about the issues around their power and legitimacy to 'speak for' others from their own group/discipline and perhaps this contributes to not 'getting' the issue from a consumer perspective? In comparison, consumers are alert to issues of legitimacy surrounding 'speaking for' other consumers and take care about these issues in a way that might be good to see more among people in these groups/disciplines.

Questions:

- How do you feel about others speaking on your behalf?
- Are you comfortable speaking on behalf of others?
- Do we ask others to be representative of their disciplines? Should we?

An argument can be made that speaking or taking a view that is against the masses is, at times, the right thing to do and sometimes this is demonstrating leadership or knowledge that others don't yet have: other professionals are respected for this and consumer leaders should be too!

Conclusion

Representing is a role or function just like advocacy or education. Providing expertise is another function and it is noteworthy that experts can disagree. Indeed, disagreement grows views, helps

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develop consumer perspective as a discipline and can be a vehicle for critique. Expertise is not grown out of representing. Consumer workers are employed to bring expertise from our lived experience.

Representation has a place and it can be useful if it is done for the right purpose and the right reasons, it is properly resourced and it is translated into meaningful

activity. When there is no time within jobs to do all the consultation necessary to do representation properly, it may be time to take stock and make decisions about how to support representation or consumer leadership in the most appropriate way.

Questions:

- Having read this paper, have you changed your thoughts on representation?
- Is there anything you may do differently now?

Reference

Happell, B. and Roper, C. (2006) 'The Myth of representation: The case for consumer leadership.' In *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 5(3).

