A Study of the Barriers in Translating 'Race' Related Research into Policy

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the barriers to translating 'race' related research into policy in order that there may be both a more strategic approach to the research process and greater realism as to the possible research outcomes. It explores two 'race' related research processes, that of the Laming Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié and that of the research into racism in social work education. It identifies the factors which led to the differing levels of success in translating these research processes into policy and suggests the key factors that need to be taken into account in translating 'race' related research into policy.

Keywords

Racism, black and minority ethnic people, public inquiries, Victoria Climbié, social work education, research implementation

Introduction

This study arose from bewilderment that, despite the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry and its quasi-acceptance of institutional racism (Macpherson, 1999), the death of a black child and a public inquiry in which racism was mooted could give rise to policies which ignored 'race' related factors. Were particular factors operating which prevented racism identified in the inquiry being translated into policy? Was this an exception or the rule? Was the evidence of racism unconvincing or deemed unimportant? The answers to these questions are not only indicators of the commitment to tackle racism in current society but important for research. The continual researching into the lives of black communities has been deemed intrusive and unhelpful by many in those communities (Butt & Mirza, 1996). If research cannot capture the complexity of their experiences and lead to policies

which are of clear benefit, a reassessment of the costs and benefits of 'race' related research may be required.

The focus in this paper on 'race' related policies may seem to suggest a belief that black people in Britain are so distinct from others that their needs can only be addressed in separate policies, *ipso facto*, a belief in distinct 'races'. This is not the case. A belief both in a common humanity and in racism as 'a discourse and practice of inferiorising ethnic groups' (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992, p12) leads to a wish to see policy that addresses both common and distinct experiences. The need to address these different experiences in policy is heightened when these experiences have been identified in research.

But much research is not translated into policy. Griffiths and Hanmer (2005) suggest that there are degrees of research

utilisation and that 'finance, politics, personal ambitions and ideology' are mediating factors (p31). Chaskin (2005) highlights dissemination, capacity of relationship building and the availability of a policy window. To seek the reasons why 'race' related research has difficulty in being translated into policy is not to suggest that this is the only research area that faces this problem. Rather, it is to study and understand one particular process in order to improve it and to deepen our understanding of more general principles.

The understanding of the particular process of translating (or failing to do so) 'race' related research into 'race' related policy may be assisted by looking at success as well as failure and by testing this understanding in a dialogue with peers. This paper principally explores the factors behind the failure to translate the 'race' related features in the Laming Inquiry (2003) into the policy of the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003) and the *Children Act* (2004). It then briefly identifies the factors which contributed to the translation of research into racism in social work education into the policy and implementation of anti-racist social work education in order to identify effective factors. This paper has been enriched by discussion with researchers, practitioners and policy makers at the REU and SSRG Conference *Inclusion and Exclusion 2005: Exploring the Messages for Policy and Practice of Research on Racism and Ethnicity.* It continues the discussion by exploring what may assist or hinder the translation of 'race' related research into policy as a contribution to further discussion, analysis and research.

Definitions

Throughout this article, 'race' related is used to refer to research which identifies, explores or challenges the differential treatment accorded to black and to white residents in Britain or/and to their different experiences. The use of the simple dichotomy black and white enables racialised treatment to be explored but has its limitations. While 'race' does not exist it remains a powerful social construction (Gilroy, 1987) on which both racism and identity is based. Yet, there are overlapping discourses. The most challenging is the relationship between this colour-based racism and other racisms such as religious, ethnic or cultural. The context-bound nature of racism, that is specific types of racism arise in particular situations for particular reasons. Thus, in the United Kingdom, along with many other Western countries, currently there appear to be an anti-Muslim racism (Islamophobia), a racism which encompasses those with African, South Asian, Chinese and Caribbean ancestry while differentiating between them, and a racism which focuses on asylum seekers and refugees. All of these are rooted in colour-based racism though coded in and amplified by religious, ethnic and cultural notions. The 'race' related research in this study encompasses research into the treatment accorded to any in the above groups. Further studies may be needed to assess whether research on particular groups within these or on white racialised groups, such as Irish or Jewish people, are more or less likely to be translated into policy due to different perceptions of these groups and different locations in socio-economic and political discourses.

A second challenge is the reality of other social constructions such as age, gender, disability, sexuality and parental status as

the basis for differential treatment. Policy could result from research on these in ways that minimise their interaction with racisms. Additionally these other axes of differential treatment may impact on the process of translating 'race' related research into policy in ways that reflect their priority in popular discourse, for example, research on black non-disabled children may have an easier transition into policy than research on black disabled adults. Further analysis in this area is required.

In this article, research is used broadly to mean inquiries, fact finding exercises, data offered by practitioners and service users to promote change as well as academic research.

Victoria Climbié

Victoria Climbié, an eight year old African girl, was starved and tortured to death in England by her great aunt, Marie Therese Kouao, and the great aunt's boyfriend, Carl Manning, despite being known to four London boroughs, two hospitals, two police child protection teams and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The Inquiry that followed was the most extensive investigation into the child protection system in British history, costing £3.8m and hearing from 158 witnesses and 121 child protection experts. The media coverage was extensive, with currently (March, 2006) 228,000 listings for Victoria Climbié on the internet. The event, Inquiry, and its outcomes have been analysed for their legal and professional significance (Johnson & Petrie, 2004; Munro, 2005; Parton, 2004; Reder & Duncan, 2004; Rustin, 2005; Stone, 2003). This article does not explore the wider legal and professional aspects covered by the

authors above but focuses on the 'race' related aspects.

Findings

Some form of prejudice?

In his opening statement to the Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, lead counsel Neil Garnham QC, said there was 'no evidence of overt racism' in the agencies that failed to protect the African girl from her murderers. Possibly this statement was made on the basis that no one white person was recorded as having said anything negative about Victoria's race, colour or ethnicity nor was there any record of failure by white professionals to intervene being due to Victoria's 'race', colour or ethnicity. Lord Laming was less definite:

> *Of course, it is impossible to assess after the event the likelihood of a particular step being taken in Victoria's case if she had been a white child. There were so many instances of bad practice in this case that one simply cannot begin to determine which of them may have been influenced by some form of prejudice, and which were due to incompetence or a lack of attention.*
> (Laming, 2003, Para 16.6)

He also stated that, 'safeguards must be in place to ensure that skin colour does not influence either the assessment of need or the quality of services delivered' (Para 16.13). Did skin colour influence either the assessment of need or the quality of service received by Victoria? The literature and the SSRG/REU workshop discussion suggests that Victoria Climbié may have experienced racism in:

1. Being deemed unworthy of full attention as a homeless African child at a time when asylum seekers were being targeted as scroungers and undeserving of benefits from the

welfare state (Rustin, 2005; Weir, 2003).

2. Failing to communicate with her in her first language, which was French (Stone, 2003).

It may be that insufficient attention was being paid in the verdict 'no overt racism' to the racism towards asylum seekers and to the fact that this may have been internalised by black as well as white practitioners. It may also be that the interlinking of oppressions has been overlooked. How did colour-based racism, racism against asylum seekers, negative stereotypes of homeless families and of non-English speakers link to affect the way Victoria and her family were perceived and treated? The Director of Ealing Social Services Department said in the Inquiry:

> *They come with a whole range of health and other problems and present in our office although they have no status legally in our country.*
> (Laming, 2003, p42)

A spokesperson from Brent said:

> *The culture in Brent at the time was that people who were in temporary accommodation ... we just tried to get them out of the borough for financial reasons.*
> (Laming, 2003, p89)

Husband (1991) has suggested that:

> *Anti-racist practice requires conceptually locating the client in their class, gender and community context and explicitly acknowledging the politics which have defined these in predominantly 'race' terms.*
> (Husband, 1991, p65)

Defining racism simplistically could affect not only its prominence in the Inquiry but the capacity to translate it into ensuing policy.

'Race' rather than racism was the buzzword in the Inquiry. The Counsel to the Inquiry said:

> *Race can affect the way people conduct themselves in other ways. Fear of being accused of racism can stop people acting when otherwise they would. Fear of being thought unsympathetic to someone of the same race can change responses.*
> (Laming, 2003, Para 16.7).

The focus therefore became not the direct racism Victoria and others may have experienced but:

- The black community's failure to report abuse, even though a relative (black) twice reported the abuse and the first clear diagnosis of abuse was recorded by a black doctor.

- A white paediatrician stating that black social workers did not always accept her opinion on black children, without any evidence as to whether the black workers had been justified or not in doing so.

- A white social services Director stating that black workers might collude and not report an inadequate black manager even though she admitted that she had known that the manager 'was not the strongest manager we had'.

The Inquiry and the media focused on the role of black workers and of cultural assumptions in terms of 'race' rather than racism, and perhaps instead of racism.

Black workers

One of Lord Laming's first statements in the section on diversity in his report was that:

> *Victoria was a black child who was*

murdered by her two black carers. Many of the professionals with whom she came into contact during her life in this country were also black.

(Laming, 2003, Para 16.1)

The failure of a black social worker and her black manager in one agency to protect Victoria Climbié dominated the discussion on diversity in the Laming Report and in the media despite this being only one of the nine agencies who failed to intervene to protect Victoria Climbié. For example, Laming highlighted the Counsel to the Inquiry's statement that 'fear of being thought unsympathetic to someone of the same race can change responses' and wholeheartedly endorsed the views of a consultant paediatrician, who said, 'I do take huge issue with the emphasis that black families should be assessed by or given the opportunity to have a black social worker' (Para 16.11).

The perception from the Inquiry report that 'political correctness puts children at risk' was widely reported by the media. For example, one report in *The Guardian* suggested that making allowances for black workers was a contributing factor to the death of Victoria Climbié (2002). The columnists Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Tony Sewell stated respectively that:

To make matters worse, many black and Asian professionals behave as though their communities are only ever good and pure.

(Alibhai-Brown, 2001)

Equally black workers must move away from this idea that they are custodians of the 'black image' and name and shame without fear of feeling a race traitor-do your job'.

(Sewell, 2003)

There was no evidence that any of the above operated in the Victoria Climbié case. The Director of the REU (now Race

Equality Foundation) suggested at the Inquiry that:

The media encouraged this simplistic version of events by ignoring allegations of racial prejudice within the child protection agencies involved ... For example, that Haringey team leader said Metropolitan police officers routinely bypassed black social work managers, including herself, to consult their white colleagues....For a large number of black frontline staff if the finger of blame is pointed at them they don't end up in jobs in other local authorities [unlike the white Director]. That's how institutional racism operates.

(Dutt, cited in Batty, 2002)

The views expressed in the media by some of the white workers in the teams demonstrated the racial prejudice described above:

Political correctness is placing thousands of west African children living in Britain at risk of the same fate that befell child abuse victim Victoria Climbié, Mangers in social services departments are too scared to confront the issue because they fear being accused of racism by West African staff, untrained staff were being recruited simply to meet ethnic quotas.

(Guardian Staff and agencies, 2002)

The findings identified dangerous practice by both black and white workers. Did this complexity make it difficult to identify institutional racism clearly and to arrive at a policy that challenged institutional racism?

Cultural assumptions

Lord Laming said:

It may well be that, at some point, the focus may have shifted from Victoria's fundamental needs because of misplaced assumptions about her cultural circumstances.

(Laming, 2003, Para 16.6).

He gave three examples (see overleaf):

- the statement by the African Caribbean social worker that she had assumed Victoria's failure to look at her great aunt indicated respect of an African Caribbean child rather than fear;

- the pastor assuming Victoria was recently arrived from Africa; and

- medical practitioners assuming the marks on her skin were insect bites gained in Africa.

It would therefore seem logical for the policy arising from this Inquiry to address professionals' reliance on cultural assumptions and the expectation and assumption that black workers should be experts on black cultures:

> *When you're in a predominantly white agency you [black workers] are often seen to have the expertise around culture and race and so you're asked for advice on that. That's often the only time you're regarded as having special knowledge, so despite their misgivings they give that advice.*
> (Dutt, cited in Batty, 2002)

> *The respondents [black workers] perceived that their white colleagues most frequently expected them to be an expert on every cultural issue; to become a hands-on expert on black clients...Oftentimes this is irrespective of the differences between black people.*
>
> (Prevatt Goldstein, 2002, p770)

Lord Laming differentiated between misplaced cultural assumptions and seeking knowledge on the particular cultural context:

> *Cultural norms and models of behaviour can vary considerably between communities and even families. The wisest course is to be humble when considering the extent of one's own knowledge about different 'cultures' and to take advice whenever it is available.*
> (Laming, 2003, Para 16.5)

But he also positioned as alternatives cultural heritage and child protection:

> *Cultural heritage is important to many people, but it cannot take precedence over standards of childcare embodied in law.*
> (Laming, 2003, Para 16.10)

There was no evidence that the reason the state agencies failed Victoria was that they gave precedence to her cultural heritage but some of his statements have been interpreted to lay the blame on 'cultural sensitivity' (Batty, 2002).

Policy

The Laming Inquiry identified three aspects of practice which should have been addressed in policy:

1. General issues such as poor professional practice of front line workers, poor recording, communication and supervision systems, poor management and a lack of accountability, poor inter-agency working. These, as Reder and Duncan (2004) suggest, have been identified in almost all the previous inquiries on the failure of the child protection agencies to protect particular children.

2. 'Race' related aspects of these areas. As Gillen (2002) suggested, 'Closer examination of the supervision styles, systems of case allocation and interagency working all prove that the race factor can not be ignored in Victoria's case'.

3. Specific 'race' related points such as ensuring that:

- Safeguards are in place to make certain that skin colour does not influence either the assessment of need or the quality of services delivered.

- All children are engaged with.

- All children are communicated with in their first language.

- Training and supervision systems enable practitioners to challenge cultural myths and stereotypes and seek appropriate individualised knowledge.

- Black workers are not assumed or expected to have cultural expertise.

- All workers and managers are competent to deal with racism within their agency and from external agencies.

While learning may be only one aim of an Inquiry (Reder and Duncan, 2004), it has been identified as a major aim of the Laming Report. In his introduction to The Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, the Prime Minister wrote:

> *Responding to the inquiry headed by Lord Laming into Victoria's death, we are proposing here a range of measures to inform and improve children's care.*
> (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2003, p1)

Yet, Weir found that:

> *As far as Victoria's worth as a black child is concerned there is very little reference in the green paper to the diverse child population in England or to the need to ensure that we provide services that serve all ethnic minority children well.*
> (Weir, 2003, p35)

The Green Paper prioritised supporting parents and carers, early intervention and effective prevention, accountability and integration and workforce reform. These general principles addressed the general findings of the Inquiry only. 'Race' and ethnicity is mentioned three times in the Green Paper in reference to: raising the attainment of ethnic minority pupils (p28),

supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children (p35), and encouraging more people from black and minority ethnic group to enter the children's workforce (p84). While beneficial, these are neither innovative nor pertinent to Victoria's situation. Victoria never attended school in England, was accompanied and not an asylum seeker, and black workers had been perceived as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

The Green Paper was swiftly followed by the *Children Act 2004* which reinforced structures for multi-agency and interagency working including Children's Trusts, Multi-agency teams and Safeguarding Boards; for communication, including a national database; and for accountability, including Directors of Children's Services and a Children's Commissioner for England. Again, the Act addresses general issues while ignoring specific 'race' related issues. For example:

- Both refer to engaging with children but without any specific mention of 'race', culture or ethnicity.

Neither the Green Paper nor the *Children Act 2004* refer to ensuring that:

- Safeguards are in place to make sure that skin colour influences either the assessment of need or the quality of services delivered.

- All children are communicated with in their first language, although this is included in Recommendation 18 from the Social Services Inspectorate.

- The need to ensure that training and supervision systems enable practitioners to challenge cultural myths and stereotypes and seek

appropriate individualised cultural knowledge, although both refer to other aspects of training.

- All workers and managers are competent to deal with racism between staff and from external agencies.

Neither mention:

- The need not to assume or expect that black workers have cultural expertise above and beyond that which would be expected in any health and social care professional.

The Laming Inquiry raised 'race' related issues, which it failed to address in policy. But the raising of these issues had some negative consequences. Following the publicity there was increased negativity towards black workers, black cultural practices and heightened suspicion of black parenting practices (Weir, 2003). This heightened cultural racism from the research may then have affected what could be translated into policy.

Research implications

Clarity of focus

Did the scope of the Inquiry and breadth of the findings make it difficult to translate the 'race' related findings into policy? Butt and colleagues (1991) found that 'race' specific policies and a specific focus on the welfare of black and minority ethnic communities in planning services were essential to providing a good service for these communities. The policy ensuing from the Laming Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié suggests that a clear focus on the 'race' related aspects of the research and a commitment to transparently translate this into policy are required, particularly when there are many competing issues. This clear focus does not obviate the need to make links

between oppressions nor to set the findings in their wider context.

Conceptual clarity

The Laming Inquiry touched on three complex areas in the field of race relations:

- the role of black workers;
- cultural sensitivity; and
- racism.

It held seminars with experts in the field of race relations. Yet, the complexity of each of these and their relationship with each other was not clearly conveyed in the findings. Did this complexity increase the difficulty of translating the findings into policy? Earlier inquiries had also focused on black children killed by black carers (Department of Health, 1991; Department of Health and Social Security, 1982). This was the first Inquiry where the involvement of black workers in the failure to protect was highlighted. What was the level of understanding of institutional racism if dangerous practice by black workers could prevent the institutional practices being interrogated for institutional racism? The Laming Inquiry and its own and subsequent policy failings suggest that 'race' related research requires a sophisticated understanding of the role of black workers and the context of interpersonal and institutional racism (Butt & Davey, 1997; Prevatt Goldstein, 2002; Rooney, 1982; Stubbs, 1985).

Laming clearly identified the dangers of misplaced cultural assumptions while advocating seeking the cultural context of each particular case. Maitra and Miller (2002) suggest that:

> *[Workers] must position themselves to seek knowledge from family particularly of their cultural norms...with genuine curiosity*

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rather than a passive theoretical acceptance of all difference as cultural or a predisposition to dramatize and exoticize non-Western culture.
                    (Maitra & Miller, 2002, pp122, 128)

Laming prioritised the safety of the child while implying that cultural considerations might jeopardize this despite the clarity in Dutt and Phillips (2000, p56) that 'culture does not explain abuse.' The Laming Inquiry suggests that 'race' related research requires great clarity on cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity, their role in child care and child protection, and their implications for the role of black and of white workers and their relationship with anti-racist practice (Husband, 1991; Sivanandan, 1991).

Political Context

Clarity of focus and conceptual clarity are particularly important if the area is highly contested. But these may be insufficient to secure policy if the political context is negative. Perhaps the negativity towards asylum seekers and immigrants and legislation which limited their rights (*Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002*) made it difficult for the policy to explicitly validate their rights to equal and quality services from state agencies. Did the negativity towards 'race' specific services following from the riots in North West England in 2001 and the promulgation of the community cohesion agenda (Cantle, 2001; Home Office, 2005) make it more difficult for policy to address 'race' specific needs? Did the response to the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 limit the space for focusing on cultural and racialised differences? While it is impossible to measure the extent any one of the above factors contributed to the failure to translate the 'race' related research into policy it is likely that their cumulative

effect created a culture where it would have required considerable political boldness or backing to create 'race' specific policy.

Was that political boldness on racism present in those undertaking the Inquiry? Duneier (2004) writes of the:

blinders that may derive from differences between ourselves and the people we write about. These blinders influence the conception of questions and the determination that certain topics should be noticed in the first place
                    (Duneier, 2004, p100)

The perspectives and ideology of each research team may be critical in fighting for 'race' related policy.

Victoria was an African child, transient, homeless with an unclear legal status. The only aspect likely to secure political backing was her status as a child and this effectively was achieved in the policy to the exclusion of any other aspect. 'Race' related research needs to consider the whole person, not just for political reasons but also because this is the lived reality (Lorde, 1984). 'Race' related research needs to balance clarity of focus on 'race', the interlinking of experiences, and the ability to win broad support in order to be translated into policy. One challenge is ensuring that when research is translated into policy all aspects, including the 'race' related, are attended to rather than only the more politically acceptable aspects.

The difficulty in translating the 'race' related research in the Laming Inquiry into 'race' related policy suggests that great care is needed before embarking on 'race' related research as the research process itself may be intrusive for the intended beneficiaries and its dissemination in a racialised society may unwittingly fuel

racism and further disadvantage its intended beneficiaries. But are these difficulties peculiar to this Inquiry? Does a comparison with a more successful process of translating 'race' related research into policy modify these conclusions?

Anti-racist social work education

In November 1988, The Central Council for Education and Training of Social Workers (CCETSW) adopted an anti-racist policy. This was subsequently endorsed in the *Rules and Requirements for the Diploma in Social Work*, which stated that:

> *CCETSW believes that racism is endemic in the values, attitudes and structures of British society, including that of social services and social work education. CCETSW …seeks to combat racist practices in all its areas of responsibilities.*
>
> (1989, p4)

These rules and requirements also stated that anti-racist knowledge, values and practice was a core requirement of the new qualification in social work, with like requirements for programme providers and practice teachers.

The research which lay behind this policy came from black students, social workers and probation officers (de Souza, 1991; Divine, 1991; Pink, 1991), black activists who made explicit the link between institutional racism and social work (Sivanandan, 1991) and academics, black and white, who challenged the structures of social work education (Ahmed, 1986; 1991; Dominelli, 1988; Husband, 1991; John, 1991). It was often anecdotal, conveyed in workshops and presentations at conferences and confirmed by small scale research (de Gale, 1991; Divine, 1991; Pink, 1991). Why did it succeed?

It neither succeeded easily (John, 1991; Sivanandan, 1991) nor maintained its dominance for long (Gourvish, 1995; Heron, 2004; O'Hagan, 2001; Williams, 1999). But it did influence cohorts of social workers, other professionals and policies and opened the space for other equality issues to be included in social work education. Factors which contributed to its success include:

- The unremitting pressure from some of CCETSW's stakeholders, black students, practitioners and academics who were entering the professions in increasing numbers.

- The rootedness of this struggle in the wider struggles of black activists (John, 1991; Sivanandan, 1991).

- The clarity of anti-racism and it being located within wider oppressive structures without losing its focus (Husband, 1991; John, 1991; Sivanandan, 1991).

- The engagement of white educationists, policy makers and practitioners in the later stages of the struggle (Naik, 1991, p163).

- The focus being limited to social work education and via the one body with authority to change social work education.

- The introduction of black members to CCETSW's Board and the establishment of a Black Perspectives Committee.

- Some acceptance by other stakeholders of the need for change, for example, it was the Secretary of State who insisted that the CCETSW Board included black members.

- A parallel movement in some local authorities endorsing anti-racism

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(Husband, 1991; John, 1991; Sivanandan, 1991)

Effective Factors

The successful transition of anti-racist social work education from research into policy highlights the importance of the research being rooted in black workers and communities and supported by white practitioners and academics and reinforces the:

- importance of a clear focus on and understanding of 'race' and anti-racism;

- adoption of a limited remit in the research and clear paths to implementation of the policy;

- need to understand and tackle institutional racism in the subject of study, research process, research dissemination and in the implementation of policy;

- need to locate anti-racism in wider equality struggles while maintaining its focus; and above all,

- importance of political willingness to accept anti-racism.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the factors that prevented the 'race' related features identified in the Laming Inquiry from being translated into positive 'race' related policy, and has compared and contrasted these briefly with the factors that seem to have assisted the implementation of anti-racist social work education. It has found that in the research itself it is the clarity and consistency of concepts that are more effective than the amount of evidence; in the dissemination it is the integrity of the dissemination rather than its breadth and in the policy creation it is the will of those

with most at stake, the strength of coalitions that did not divert and a timely political fit that drove the process. Sound evidence is, of course, central to the integrity of any research process but it may be that if translation into policy is a desired outcome considerable attention also needs to be paid to promoting the features highlighted above. These are tentative findings which would benefit from the analysis of other transitions of 'race' related research from research into policy. But they do demonstrate that the transition of 'race' related research into policy is likely to be heavily dependent on the 'politics and ideology' highlighted by Griffiths and Hanmer (2005) and the dissemination, capacity of relationship building and the availability of a policy window identified by Chaskin (2005).

Acknowledgements

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