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CHAPTER 25

EMPOWERMENT

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Empowerment has been the subject of widespread and often thoughtful and careful theorizing, study, and application in the fields of social work, community psychology, health promotion, and organizational studies. Unfortunately, it also became an overused buzz-word in consulting, self help, and policy circles. To many, its frequently vague, meaningless usage (sometimes, ironically, for the purpose of co-opting or placating people) has given empowerment a bad name. The aim of this chapter is to dig past the misuse, and overuse, of the term empowerment to reveal, identify, and clarify its utility and importance for political and civic leadership.

Definitions

So what does empowerment really mean? Empowerment has been defined and measured in many different ways. Aside from the many politicians and others who use it without defining it at all, this is perhaps the greatest problem with the concept. Empowerment has been defined as an intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources; or a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

The common elements in those definitions are that empowerment (a) is a process, (b) occurs in communities (and, I would add, in organizations), (c) involves active participation, critical reflection, awareness and understanding (i.e., consciousness raising about the influence of powerful political and economic structures and interests), and (d) involves access to and control over important decisions and resources. The only difference is that the second definition does not mention creating a climate of mutual respect and caring, which may be especially important for political and civic leaders to include in their understanding and practice of empowerment (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991).

Empowerment is not only a *process*, however. It can also be thought of as the life and outlook-changing *outcome* of such a process for individuals, organizations, and whole communities. This chapter is in the section on “Purposes of Political and Civic Leadership,” and empowerment certainly is an important benefit, and for many, perhaps even a goal of developing new leaders and of developing as a leader. Yet I prefer to view empowerment not as a goal or outcome of participation or leadership but rather as a key part of the process of both developing and applying political and civic leadership. The main reason for that preference is that far too many studies and writings have been about how to make people *feel empowered* and too few have been about how to *use* empowerment strategies to gain and apply the *actual power* needed to make important, material improvements in community conditions and people’s lives.

Overview

Empowerment is, by definition, a collective rather than just an individual process. It is no doubt important for individuals to take control over their fears, addictions, and other self-destructive or socially disruptive thoughts and behaviors. Psychologists call that individual trait by different names, such as self-efficacy, mastery, or internal locus of control. But that is not empowerment, regardless of what self-improvement books may say. Empowerment through participatory action with others is, in fact, one of the most effective ways to master one’s fears, obsessions, or disdain for self or others. It has many important individual benefits, including greater health, wellbeing, life satisfaction, and happiness (Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich & Chavis, 1990; Wallerstein, 1993). But think of those as side benefits because empowerment is mainly about working together for our shared interests, to improve our communities and institutions, and build a more just society.

Empowerment Phenomena and Approaches to Intervention

In the most grandiose sense, empowerment is about the theory, science, and action of (a) identifying and understanding all forms and sources of oppression throughout society, and (b) liberating those individuals, groups, and communities who are oppressed to reach their full potential, be they young or old, working or unemployed; housed or homeless; male or female; urban or rural; gay, straight, or other; no matter their race, religion, or national origin.

In a more mundane, but real and important sense, empowerment is about the commitment it takes to do all the vital, if not always exciting, activities that make groups and organizations effective and give their members at all levels “voice and choice”—that is, real collective decision making and shared leadership. These are most commonly found in small-scale grassroots organizations, such as block and neighborhood improvement associations, congregations and other faith-based organizations, and 12-step and other mutual aid groups. But empowerment can also occur in larger organizations, such as political movements and campaigns that help participants feel they are a part of large and important causes or changes. It happens in some human service agencies, colleges, and businesses, while other bureaucracies, universities, corporations, and even some churches can be disempowering to those who lack voice and choice, who are different, who do not quite fit in, or who simply retreat, get lost, or give up.

Empowerment represents a paradigm shift in leaders’, scholars’, and ordinary people’s assumptions, attitudes, and values: a shift from emphasizing professional or other forms of authority to equal and valued partnerships; from keeping one’s distance from clients and subordinates to working closely and collaboratively; from dependency to self-help; from illness to wellness, from *ameliorating* problems, deficits, or risk factors to *transforming* and *liberating* one’s self, organization, and community toward competence; and from focusing on weaknesses and victim blaming to identifying and developing strengths.

History of the Concept

This multi-faceted, but related set of paradigm shifts has been in progress under various names, theories, and movements starting at least as far back as the social and political upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s era of civil rights in the United States and human rights, liberation, and independence movements around the globe. It was not until Barbara Solomon’s 1976 book *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* that the term “empowerment” appeared in its current usage. That was soon followed in 1977 by an influential American Enterprise Institute monograph by Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus entitled *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*. Berger and Neuhaus provided an important focus on voluntary associations, churches, and other community organizations, which serve to mediate between individuals or families and impersonal and unresponsive mass society institutions, such as large government agencies and corporations, but the authors also had a clear Conservative, small government agenda (Perkins, 1995). Berger and Neuhaus foresaw increased citizen participation (or at least control, for example, in the form of school or child care vouchers) in many policy areas, including law enforcement, education, mentoring, housing, human services, and health care. But their essay is less about policy making or power or even empowerment (let alone a specific analysis of ways in which mediating structures may be involved in those policy areas) than it is about the idea of supplanting government-sponsored programs and policies with supposedly less intrusive, more sensitive, and less costly local voluntarism and community control. Berger and Neuhaus claim nonpartisanship and, indeed, community service and community control *can* have all those advantages and *is* supported by Liberals as well as Conservatives. But their essay was funded by, and written as a rallying cry for, the neo-Conservative movement, which adopted the term empowerment. The difference is that Berger and Neuhaus argued for true, as opposed to token, decentralization of power whereas the aim of many neo-Conservatives is to garner and maintain power at the most centralized levels of government and commerce.

Thus, from the beginning, the concept of empowerment has been inherently political and ambiguous—its interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. A right-wing think tank and lobby organization titled *Empower America* was created in 1993 by conservative Republican political leaders and a few of their wealthiest donors. At the same time, “empowerment” was also co-opted by neo-Liberals for overtly political purposes (Perkins, 1995). Unfortunately, all of these uses of empowerment language by political leaders have tended to be ideologically, rather than theoretically or scientifically, based, and thus remain vague, superficial to the point of meaningless, and thus unhelpful.

For deeper, more meaningful theories, studies, and applications of empowerment, we must look to the literature in social work, business administration, health education and promotion, and especially community psychology (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Julian Rappaport (1981) is most credited with promoting the paradigm shifts outlined above. He argued that expert-driven and professionally managed prevention and intervention programs and services tend to view people in distress as personified needs, as if they are simply passive, child-like objects who cannot act effectively in their own best interest. He called for policy-makers, program leaders, and scholars to move away from a paternalistic emphasis on people’s needs, and even away from advocacy on behalf of people in distress, toward an empowerment model that, on both social justice and practical grounds, recognizes that, while people may occasionally need assistance, information, or

expert advice, they should play as active a role as possible in designing and controlling their own help and destiny.

The next important publication on empowerment was a 1984 special issue (Vol. 3, issue 2-3) of the journal *Prevention in Human Services*, which included a life-span human developmental analysis of citizen leaders in grassroots organizations, a study of empowerment in a religious setting, a case study of environmental justice in which a Native American tribal community organized politically to avoid the loss of their homeland due to a proposed dam, an organizational structure and process analysis of the feminist movement, a demonstration project on help seeking and receiving in urban ethnic neighborhoods, a description of new ways human service professionals can create and apply social technologies to facilitate empowerment, a case study of the strengths and limitations of empowerment in a colonial context (Serrano-Garcia, 1984; see international examples, below), and a cross-cultural comparison of synergistic community healing resources. This early volume thus set or predicted much of the agenda for empowerment theory, research and interventions to follow as, a few years later, it would explode into literally thousands of articles, books, projects and programs across many social science disciplines and professional and policy sectors (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

That explosion of interest in empowerment showed that theorists and researchers were already grappling with some complex and difficult problems with the concept and with the observation that efforts at empowerment were often constrained (Couto, 1989), limited, or failed altogether. Early on, Rappaport (1981) recognized that empowerment involved certain paradoxes that required less linear and more dialectical thinking.¹ Empowerment dialectics include the following:

- (a) simultaneously emphasizing both personal and collective (and, for some, spiritual) control, (b) the paradoxical requirements of leadership, order, and organization in helping others to help themselves (i.e., to counteract disempowering institutional constraints; Gruber & Trickett, 1987), (c) people's needs for both individual and community identity within empowering organizations and (d) for both change and stability at all levels..., (e) the personal and organizational benefits of greater empowerment along with its risks and challenges (e.g., burnout, disappointment), (f) a political orientation embraceable by Big Government progressives and Small Government conservatives alike..., and (g) an approach to theory and research on empowerment that allows for both deductive and inductive logic." (Perkins, 1995, p. 789)

In addition, empowerment dialectics include the discovery of both specific, practical information and universal principles.

There began to be more careful theory, measurement, and empirical validation of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Applied fields that had developed a rich body of practical experience with empowerment, such as community organizing and development, were studied for clues to empowerment (Friedmann, 1992; Perkins, Brown & Taylor, 1996; Pigg, 2002; Saegert & Winkel, 1996; Speer & Hughey, 1995). Empowerment strategies quickly spread to other applied fields, such as health education and promotion (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988), education (Cherniss, 1997), youth development (Maton, 2008), substance abuse prevention (Fawcett et al., 1995), and violence prevention (Webster & Perkins, 2001). Empowerment may have lost some of the political luster it had in the 1990s, but it remains a very popular topic in both the social science and professional literatures to this day.

Exploration of Empowerment

This section will explicate empowerment as a collective, multilevel phenomenon. It will then review issues in leadership and empowerment across several different sectors, including grassroots community organizations, community health and other coalitions, human service agencies, and business. The section concludes by considering the global reach of empowerment.

Empowerment as a Collective, Multilevel Phenomenon

Much of the research on empowerment, probably too much of it, has focused on the individual psychological level. Scholars have distinguished different components of psychological empowerment, including *intrapersonal* (domain-specific perceived control, self-efficacy, motivation to control, perceived competence, and mastery), *interactional* (the understanding people have about their community and related sociopolitical issues), and *behavioral* (actions taken to directly influence outcomes; Speer, 2000), although the latter has generally been measured and studied separately as citizen participation, civic engagement, or social capital (see below and Chapter 36: Citizen Advocacy and Civil Society, Chapter 42: Community Organizing; and Chapter 69: Social Capital).

As noted above, however, empowerment must be understood to differ from control-related psychological phenomena

¹ A dialectic is a systematic form of reasoning in which oppositional paradoxes are resolved, usually by taking a new perspective, without denying either contradictory idea.

at the individual level, such as internal locus of control, self-efficacy, social learning expectancies, hardy personality, problem-focused (vs. emotion-focused) coping style, mastery, or learned hopefulness. Like those intrapsychic concepts, empowerment applies to both processes and outcomes (Fawcett et al, 1995; Pigg, 2002). If empowerment were simply about individual control, however, we would not need a separate concept for it, for all of those theories above would more than suffice.

Thus one of the most important and defining characteristics of empowerment is that it is assumed to operate at *multiple ecological levels-- individuals, groups and organizations, and whole communities* (See Table 25.1; Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman & Checkoway, 1995). At the individual level, people participate in a variety of grassroots community organizations and, in so doing, develop greater perceived control over local civic and political issues and activities and develop important resource mobilization skills. At the next level, groups and organizations that engage in meaningful collective decision making and shared leadership processes realize various organizational and network development outcomes and enhanced policy leverage. Finally, communities and networks of people and organizations also engage in collective action in order to access resources, which results in greater political impacts and civic improvement through coalition building, enhanced pluralism and diversity, and access to resources.

Table 25.1 Levels, Processes, and Outcomes of Empowerment

<i>Levels</i>	<i>Processes</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>
Individual	Participation in community organizations	Perceived control and resource mobilization skills
Organization	Collective decision -making, shared leadership	Organizational development, networks, policy leverage
Community	Collective action to access resources	Pluralism, coalitions, accessible resources

Source: Adapted from Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995.

An alternative empowerment typology, which also reflects its multilevel nature, comes from community organizing for environmental justice. Rich, Edelstein, Hallman and Wandersman (1995) identify these types of empowerment: *intrapersonal* (situation-specific individual-level confidence and competence), *instrumental* (effective action via citizen participation at the individual to group levels), *substantive* (effective action at the organizational or community levels), and *formal* (at the structural or societal level, where the larger political system allows for meaningful local control).

A related concept that, like empowerment, has arguably been over-exposed and not always used with precision, clarity, and consistency is *social capital*. My own theory is that empowerment, or collective efficacy, is the cognitive component of social capital, which along with neighboring, sense of community and citizen participation constitute social capital at the individual level and lead to the bridging, linking and networking that make social capital effective at the community level (see Perkins, Hughey & Speer, 2002). The literature on social capital is now so vast, I can only refer readers to the above sources and Chapter 69 in this volume.

The closest concept to empowerment that does not yet suffer from overuse is *collective efficacy*, or perceived efficacy of collective action (Perkins et al, 1996).² Those interested in empowerment should be sure to study collective efficacy as that is the term and concept that has continued to be more carefully researched—empowerment is used too loosely and is more often invoked for vague practical or political purposes in the literature.

Leadership and Empowerment in Grassroots Community Organizations

Much of what we know about leadership of empowering organizations and how to empower people to become effective leaders comes from studies and practical experience of grassroots community organizations and voluntary associations (Homan, 2008; Kahn, 1991; Pigg, 2002; see also <http://ctb.ku.edu/>). These small-scale, low-budget organizations work for members' collective self-interest, are typically independent and locally and nonprofessionally self-governed, and as such are akin to self-help or mutual aid groups, which have also been a major focus of empowerment research. Grassroots organizations address community development (Perkins et al., 1996), housing (Saegert & Winkel, 1996), environmental (Rich et al, 1995), social and any other issues that arise.

² To avoid confusion, note that this psychological conception of “collective efficacy” is different than the same sociological term as used by Robert Sampson and others. Theirs is a combination of what community psychologists and criminologists have studied and called neighboring behavior, informal social control, and sense of community. To clarify matters, some distinguish between organizational collective efficacy (empowerment through organized collective action) and neighborhood collective efficacy (informal social control, neighboring, etc.).

We know that leaders are, not surprisingly, more psychologically empowered than nonleaders (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), although that begs the question of whether empowered individuals become leaders or whether holding leadership positions empowers people. Almost certainly, both are true—leadership and empowerment are mutually reinforcing.

More useful perhaps is research showing that even those in oppressed circumstances, with few personal human or material resources and little training or education have become empowered and effective leaders. That suggests that virtually anyone can be empowered and become a leader. For example, Saegert (& Winkel, 1996) has for many years studied the experiences of low-income residents, predominantly minority women, in limited-equity co-ops in some of the most challenging neighborhoods of New York City. She not only found them able to lead and develop their grassroots housing organizations but also found that their empowerment fostered greater personal well-being and development, and increased their ability to achieve various work and child rearing goals. It even led to material improvements, such as better physical conditions in their building and neighborhood, improvements which are important as they take empowerment effects beyond mere internal feelings of control (see below “On the Distinction Between Power and Empowerment”). These effects, in turn, led to further empowerment at the individual and group level and to more engagement with civic and political life, such as voting behavior.

Another study with practical implications, of individual and organizational empowerment among members and leaders of block associations in New York City, applied social exchange and political economy theories (Prestby et al., 1990). Similar to Saegert’s work, this study found that the most active participants reported more communal and personal benefits. This study also looked at costs of participation and found them to significantly hinder participation. By effectively managing participatory costs and benefits, leaders of these voluntary associations were able to facilitate greater participation and empowerment among members. Those who did not try as much, or who were unable, to increase incentives or reduce costs of participation found themselves leading less active, less effective organizations. Many of those eventually became dormant or defunct, which is unfortunately all too common among grassroots organizations. A study of those same organized blocks and a sample of nearby nonorganized blocks identified a variety of social and environmental factors, including collective efficacy or empowerment, that were predictive of both individual and block-level participation (Perkins et al, 1996).

A study of how to train, support and empower grassroots leaders in Israel found that social support and self-esteem predicted different components of psychological empowerment among lower-income urban community activists. Support from family and self-esteem contributed to leadership competence, that is, to confidence in one’s leadership skills, whereas a sense of mastery, self-esteem, and the support of friends contributed to policy control, or confidence in one’s ability to influence policy decisions (Itzhaky & York, 2003).

It must be acknowledged, however, that as important as community empowerment strategies are, grassroots organizing at the community or neighborhood level is usually limited to addressing problems that do not require substantial resources or expertise. According to Dreier (1996),

The major obstacle to successful community organizing is the lack of training in leadership development and organizational capacity building. The primary strategy recommended for overcoming this obstacle is to help community organizations take advantage of intermediary organizations such as organizing networks and training centers. (p. 121).

The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, Industrial Areas Foundation, Pacific Institute for Community Organizing, the Midwest Academy, Highlander Research and Education Center, the Community Tool Box, and the Center for Community Change are all examples of such organizing networks and training centers.³

Challenges of Empowerment through Community Coalitions

The main way for small, under-resourced community organizations to gain the power needed to solve larger problems is through forming and developing organizational coalitions. Coalitions are generally organized to comprehensively engage multiple social systems (families, schools, workplaces, media, civic organizations) in solving shared and intractable social, psychological, and health problems, such as the prevention of alcohol and other drug problems or of youth violence. Coalitions pose unique challenges for civic and political leadership for they constitute large numbers of agency leaders, each with their own needs, egos, values, politics, styles, and agendas, any or all of which may conflict.

Community coalitions have been around for many decades, as long as local groups and organizations have recognized the greater and wider impact they can have by standing together and sharing information, resources, and especially the political clout that comes with greater numbers. They were rarely the focus of research, however, until the

³ Each has a website with more information; see also Homan (2008) and Kahn (1991).

late 1980s after coalitions began forming in response to the crack cocaine epidemic. Anti-drug coalitions began to receive funding and organizational support from foundations, city governments, and the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, which was the real engine for their regional and national expansion (including the forming of coalitions of coalitions) and study starting in the early 1990s. Fawcett et al (1995) identified 33 specific enabling activities or tactics within four general strategies for promoting community empowerment in the context of community substance abuse prevention and health promotion coalitions: (1) enhancing experience and competence of members and leaders; (2) enhancing group structure and capacity; (3) removing social and environmental barriers to participation, empowerment and development; and (4) enhancing environmental support and resources for coalitions. Community leadership, shared decision making, connections to other organizations, and a positive organizational climate are critical factors in member satisfaction and participation in such coalitions (but are unrelated to the quality of coalition plans; Butterfoss, Goodman & Wandersman, 1996).

There was much early optimism about the ability of health promotion coalitions to both empower communities and measurably improve population-wide health (Butterfoss et al, 1996), neither of which was clearly achieved in hardly any careful evaluation studies, although those too were too rare. As often happens with large and popular new policies, about a decade after the community coalition boom began, more independent and critical observers began to question how representative, participatory, empowering (e.g., in terms of decision-making), grassroots, community-change-oriented, and effective coalitions really are (Couto, 1998). Leadership can make a difference, but their empowering potential is often limited, rather than enhanced, by their close ties to, even dependency upon, foundations and government agencies that may support citizen participation as long as it does not question key assumptions or policies, such as the social equity and justice of healthcare spending and the emphasis on individual treatment and behavior change rather than community or policy-level healthy environment-healthy business interventions and universal healthcare. If health coalitions were organized using grassroots organizing and popular education (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988) strategies to challenge those structural issues, that really could be empowering.

Couto (1998) reviews the full range of community coalitions as instruments of social policy and program implementation and identifies nine types of community-based organizations, differences in representation and participation, a difference between community organizing and community development change efforts, and four forms of empowerment: (1) direct, group psychopolitical empowerment (e.g., tenants organizations and local chapters of grassroots organizations), (2) direct, individual psychosymbolic empowerment (e.g., 12-step self-help groups and other grassroots services), (3) advocacy for group psychopolitical empowerment (the goal of which would be to reform of public policy and programs, ostensibly one of the main purposes of many coalitions, although Couto identified no clear examples of this form of empowerment, perhaps because coalitions ironically tend to avoid issues seen as too political), and (4) advocacy for individual psychosymbolic empowerment (adaptation of programs to groups with special needs, e.g., voluntary organizations, services and professional associations). Couto argues that community coalitions whose member groups share the same forms of representation and participation and pursue similar forms of empowerment and change at least have a chance at success. It is difficult to establish and maintain truly active and effective community coalitions even under the best circumstances; when their member values or expectations differ or their agenda is too broad or unclear, it poses even greater challenges. They must be flexible and adapt to new or changing issues, but that too can threaten the coalition's solidarity, so the tendency is to play it safe, which does not lead to either empowering or effective results.

So where does that leave community coalitions as a focus of empowering civic and political leadership? Despite the above cautions and track record, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Coalitions can still be a powerful tool for community change, especially if they resist funding and political pressures and adopt a grassroots participatory empowerment orientation, teach their members about root causes including political, economic and environmental ones, mobilize their membership effectively, work well with media, and are able to collaborate effectively. Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson and Allen (2001) identified processes at four different levels to help coalitions and other networks develop their collaborative capacity: (1) individual members' collaborative capacity can be improved by teaching them skills and knowledge, and fostering positive attitudes and motivation, for working in collaboration; (2) relational capacity can be enhanced with positive internal relationships among members as well as external relationships with other networks; (3) organizational capacity comes with sufficient resources and effective leadership, communication, and procedures; and (4) programmatic capacity depends on following realistic goals driven by community needs and on culturally competent program designs.

Leadership and Empowerment in Human Service Agencies

Leadership has always been important in administration of public and nonprofit human service agencies. Such large and often impersonal organizations have rarely been thought of as empowering, however, for their staffs, clients, or even their leaders. In an effort to change that, community psychologists have studied examples of empowering processes and

structures in a variety of service organizations. For example, Bond and Keys (1993) analyzed group dynamics on the board of an agency serving people with developmental disabilities and found that the board, which included both parents and other community members, could be empowered when the board culture promoted inclusionary group processes and activation of member resources. Collaboration between empowered groups occurred when the board culture encouraged (a) awareness, respect, and appreciation of the values, history, and norms of each group and interdependencies between groups (the strengths of diversity) and (b) the development of individuals and structures spanning the boundaries between groups. Empowerment and collaboration of both groups synergized board functioning which enabled the organization to accomplish more than when one group dominated.

One of the more revealing studies of empowerment across different human services contexts was by Maton and Salem (1995) who analyzed a religious fellowship, a mutual help organization for severely mentally ill persons, and an education program for urban African-Americans. Spirituality and faith-based settings, communal ritual and celebrations, and individual, organizational and community narratives are all especially vital to community empowerment, solidarity, and cultural identity (Rappaport, 1995). They identified consistent empowering characteristics across the different organizational settings, including positive group belief systems that challenged but motivated members, meaningful opportunity role structures that capitalize upon members' different strengths, an array of economic and social supports, and organizationally and interpersonally talented leaders. Maton (2008) recently extended those observations by identifying some of the leadership characteristics, pathways and processes through which empowering community settings-- in the domains of adult well-being, positive youth development, locality development, and social change-- influence members' development and empowerment, the surrounding community, and the larger society (see Table 25.2).

Table 25.2 Characteristics of Empowering Settings

<p><i>Leadership</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspirational (vision, role model) Talented (interpersonally, organizationally) Shared (multiple leaders, open to expansion) Committed (to setting, to members) Empowered (autonomy, resources) <p><i>Resource Cultivation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activating of personal resources Opportunity role structure, participatory niches Increasing benefits, reducing costs of member participation Mentoring <p><i>Belief System</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group based, transcending self-concern Individual, organizational, community narratives Focus on strengths of members Fosters critical awareness among members 	<p><i>Group Climate</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared events, celebrations, ritual Peer-based social support systems Appreciating and managing diversity, interdependencies, conflict Boundary spanning <p><i>Task Functioning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive efforts to define community issues, resources Structured, clear goals and tasks Inclusive, democratic decentralized decision-making Subgroups for specific tasks or sectors of community Learning focused (responsive & adaptive reflection, communication, collaboration)
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Source: Adapted from data in Maton & Salem, 1995; Maton, 2008.

Leaders can greatly influence organizational culture, and in human service bureaucracies, multiple competing cultures can influence the critical preconditions for worker empowerment. Large bureaucratic systems, especially public-sector ones, often contain many cultural elements inconsistent with an empowering work culture. That can be overcome, however, by a local site subculture that promotes employee and client empowerment. This line of research shows that empowerment can take on multiple forms across employees and between employees and leaders (Foster-Fishman, Salem, Chibnall, Legler & Yapchai, 1998). Different and shifting ecologies cause employees' empowerment experiences to vary and fluctuate over time. Empowerment is thus a more dynamic, highly individualistic, context-dependent process than originally theorized.

Organizational learning, which has been studied in both the for-profit and human service sectors, is an important aspect of organizational empowerment and vice-versa (Perkins, Bess, Cooper, Jones, Armstead & Speer, 2007). *Learning organization* characteristics include, not only a culture and structures promoting rapid communication, continuous learning, and knowledge generation and sharing, but also greater participation and accountability by all stakeholders—staff, clients, volunteers, and the wider community. Core learning organization practices include, not only providing strategic leadership for learning, promoting inquiry and dialogue and creating systems to capture and share learning, but

also encouraging critical reflection, collaboration and team learning and empowering people toward a collective vision.

Perkins et al (2007) present a three-dimensional framework of organizational learning and empowerment structures and processes in terms of first-order (incremental or ameliorative) and second-order (transformative) change at the individual, organizational, and community levels. Case studies of a participatory neighborhood planning organization, a grassroots faith-based social action coalition, and a larger community-based human service agency show that organizations that empower staff and volunteers through opportunities for learning and participation at the individual level are better able to succeed in terms of organization-level learning and transformation. Community-level changes are harder to find and must be made a more explicit goal of human services.

Learning that can lead to second-order change at each level must help participants engage in critical analysis of (a) the organization's demonstrated goals and values, (b) the power relationships implicit in decision-making at each level, (c) the interdependent role of participant stakeholders and organizations as part of a complex, community-wide (or larger) system, and (d) how to work toward transformative change of all the above. (Perkins et al., 2007; pp. 303-304)

Leadership and Empowerment in the Business Sector

Although empowerment in the public and nonprofit sectors is more relevant to civic and political leadership, empowerment in the corporate context may also hold lessons (Bachrach & Botwinick, 1992). Much of the research on business employee and manager empowerment has been done by Spreitzer (1995) who found that intrapersonal empowerment (seeing one's job as meaningful and important; work-related confidence and mastery; autonomy, a sense of control and impact in one's department) mediates the relationship between the social structural context (role ambiguity, sociopolitical support, access to strategic information and resources, work unit culture) and behavioral innovation. She also found that empowerment was directly related to effectiveness as assessed by subordinates. Thus, contextual constraints, opportunities, and supports are important, but psychological empowerment can make or break individual, and ultimately organizational, innovation and effectiveness.

Leadership has also been a major focus of management theory and research. Traditionally, leadership has been vertical—that is, one person “in charge.” As work becomes more complex, and as individual managers and executives are unable to keep up with that complexity, work has become increasingly team based even at middle and higher levels of companies. Consistent with empowerment principles, leadership can be effectively shared within teams, either with joint decision making or by rotating leadership depending on who has the most knowledge, skills, and experience for the issue at hand. Research shows that dominating team leaders have poorer performing teams while shared leadership leads to higher performance (Pearce, 2004). It is important to note that this does not argue for always using shared leadership, let alone a completely horizontal organizational structure, which is usually inefficient. The key questions then are (a) how to combine the best of vertical and shared leadership, (b) when is leadership most appropriately shared, and (c) how is shared leadership developed? (Pearce, 2004).

Empowerment's Global Reach

The voluminous attention to empowerment theory and research has been concentrated more in the United States than any other country. However, applications of empowerment concepts, and the study of those applications, have spread widely throughout the globe. As empowerment is a response to oppression, it is not surprising that scholars and community and resistance leaders in many troubled parts of the world have begun to borrow and adapt empowerment ideas to their own circumstances. Outside the United States, Latin America has provided the greatest wealth of literature on empowerment. One of the first and best studies was by Serrano-Garcia (1984) who found that empowerment could be illusory in the context of colonialism and rural development in Puerto Rico. She describes a community development intervention that used empowerment strategies and tactics (modeling of collaborative roles, explicit verbalization of values, questioning, providing information, musical interventions) to facilitate residents' ideological and skill development. Although participants were empowered, on an ideological level, Serrano-Garcia concluded that empowerment was only an illusion in that the dominant culture and its institutions were still conservative, capitalist, individualistic, pro-United States, and that participants remain part of that culture and are heavily influenced by its values. Globalization has no doubt made that even truer today than it was 25 years ago.

Empowerment has become a core principle of international community development. Friedmann (1992) defines poverty not only in economic terms, but also as social, political and psychological powerlessness. He sees empowerment as an alternative to the overemphasis of international development agencies and many national governments on purely economic policies, which have been found wanting. Development interventions, he argues, should empower and mobilize poor households and communities for political participation on a wider scale. Only if people control their own destinies can long-term progress occur.

That is not to suggest that political empowerment is easily achieved, either in the developed or developing world. Kroeker (1995) worked with a Nicaraguan agricultural cooperative and observed relationships across levels of organization that were complex and not always reciprocal. It met the material needs of its community. Its organizational structure and consciousness-raising processes promoted broad participation in decision making. Those and the national co-op movement fostered psychological empowerment at individual level. However, leaders tended to be autocratic and members feared speaking in meetings and could not face crises, and outsiders thought the co-op was poorly organized. Thus, there was mixed evidence of empowerment within the organization, and outsiders and the macropolitical context hindered empowerment. Empowerment work and research in less developed and war-torn countries is vitally important but difficult and often dangerous. A colonial history and current hegemony contribute to dependency. The level of political and economic oppression may make meaningful empowerment and substantial and lasting material gains virtually impossible.

Business and economic development in China has received attention for several decades, but what is new and exciting is the focus by scholars, both within and outside China, on local community social and political development, citizen participation, resistance, democratization, and empowerment (Xu, Perkins & Chow, 2010). Those delivering and studying empowerment programs must be careful to not overtly criticize the government and especially the central party, but rather to show that the goal is to work collaboratively with local leaders to make government and nascent community organizations more effective and responsive in addressing the serious social, economic, health, education, and environmental problems that still plague many countries in Asia, Latin America, and especially Africa.

The biggest research gap on civic and political leadership and empowerment is in international and cross-cultural comparative studies. There are plentiful examples of empowerment-based interventions and research around the globe (Friedmann, 1992; Itzhaky & York, 2003), but more systematically coordinated and comparable data and sharing of data and information are needed. That will require concerted efforts to create and standardize comparable indicators of empowerment and related concepts in different languages and cultures (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007), and to organize international data collection.

Applications of Empowerment Theory and Research

On the Distinction between Power and Empowerment

The range of empowerment-based applications is described in the preceding sections. What deserves more attention is the importance of distinguishing between empowerment as it is too often researched and discussed, as a purely psychological outcome, and actual power or influence. The definitions offered at the start of this chapter do imply real power in the sense of control over valued resources, but too many researchers (and possibly civic leaders too) equate *feelings* of empowerment with *actual power* or influence over key decisions.

Grassroots community, issue, and labor organizing are particularly revealing contexts for promoting both empowerment and power and for distinguishing the two. One must view empowerment from an ecological (multilevel, contextual, interdependent, dynamic) perspective, as Speer and Hughey (1995) do in describing the relationship between empowerment and power in a national community organizing network. They find that empowerment can be realized at the individual and organizational levels in a dialectic of action and reflection, but that social power is built on the strength of interpersonal relationships, both internal and especially external to the group. Speer also uses a real-life example of praxis (the process in which theory and practice are synthesized by each informing the other) with a local faith-based inner-city grassroots coalition to illustrate the intentional exercise of power (Speer et al., 2003). The organization's team of leaders operated from a clear understanding of power and what they sought to accomplish and leveraged their power creatively to solve serious problems in one of the poorest, most troubled cities in the United States. Speer et al (2003) conclude that "fashion in social science--such as empowerment and social capital--often insinuate action, movement and practice, but too often the action in these orientations is in their conceptualization rather than their implementation..." (p. 399).

Empowering organizations generally focus most on participatory practices within the workplace, but they will only address, alter, and use power relationships by challenging their current operating paradigm or mission, attend to the social justice needs of their wider communities, and engage community participation in new, more overtly political ways (Perkins et al, 2007). Many nongovernmental and public organization leaders, both, mistakenly believe they cannot engage in any political lobbying or advocacy, a belief which is generally not the case. There is wide latitude for issue-focused public education and lobbying; and although U.S. tax laws prevent nonprofit organizations from working directly to influence elections, people are generally free to engage in any political activity as private individuals. The real constraints arise only in the context of repressive governments (see preceding section) and in democratic societies, fear of losing funding. Thus, civic, political, and philanthropic leaders must also challenge those who hold the public and private purse strings to support work correcting social, economic, and political injustices, and if that is not possible, at least not punish organizations doing such work.

Summary

Remaining Questions and Future Directions

It should be clear by now that empowerment, for all its strengths and promise, is no panacea. Riger (1993) argued that an empowerment orientation raises expectations for real power, which are unrealistic and rarely achieved. She also suggested that empowerment's emphasis on autonomy only increases competition within and among groups and, thus, overshadows more cooperative or communitarian approaches that women's or other groups might take. Both concerns still have validity, but all social movements raise expectations of power. Riger's emphasis on group solidarity, while laudable and useful, ignores the fact that groups must also be empowered at both the individual and organizational level to deal with group-level power and resource disparities. The threat of disappointment and disempowerment is why it is important to start small and build. Whether or not the danger of empowered people competing with each other is significant, Riger's caution does highlight the importance of collaboration within organizations (Bond & Keys, 1993) and effective coalition building among them (Fawcett et al., 1995).

Riger's feminist critique of empowerment is ironic given that empowerment-oriented self-help groups tend to attract more women than men (except for Alcoholics Anonymous and even it is changing). Indeed, the women's consciousness-raising group is one of the best examples of self help as part of an empowering social and political movement (as Riger herself wrote in the 1984 special issue of *Prevention in Human Services*). Similar to empowerment, consciousness raising involves the shift in one's world view that results from recognizing one's inferior social and economic position in society. A better understanding of gender and other differences in the experience of and reaction to power disparities (Bookman & Morgan, 1988) is just one of the many ways self help and consciousness raising can inform our understanding of empowerment and vice versa.

In management circles, contrary to Riger, empowering structures and processes such as shared leadership represent a new, *more feminist* leadership paradigm.

Increased accessibility of information, cross-functional workplace challenges and financial belt-tightening have led organizations since the 1990s to consider a collaborative leadership style where leaders embrace teamwork and empower staff through motivation rather than wielding traditional authoritarian power. For females in particular, a collaborative style fits with feminist principles of relationship/consensus building and power sharing. (Fischbach, Smerz, Findlay, Williams & Cox, 2007, p. 30).

Empowerment has also become an important orientation for social researchers and program evaluators (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). Just as with empowerment programs and policies, however, it is critical that planners, administrators, and researchers focus, not just on psychological empowerment, but on actual power relationships and tactics across (a) multiple levels of intervention and analysis (from individuals through, especially, institutions, communities, and society), (b) various states of oppression, liberation and wellness, and (c) domains of environment or capital (sociocultural, political, economic, and physical; Christens & Perkins, 2008). To do this, they must be prepared to engage in action research and collaborate broadly and effectively across disciplinary and sectorial divides.

Recommendations to Political and Civic Leaders

Perkins (1995) offered 10 recommendations to policy-makers, program planners and researchers based on a critical review of empowerment-oriented programs and policies. They are as valid today as they were then and apply equally well to civic and political leaders:

1. Attend to different levels of empowerment, particularly beyond individual to collective conceptions commensurate with solving group, organizational and community problems.
2. Smaller is better. Beyond the local community and organizational level, higher levels of policy-making result in more ambiguous less effective uses of empowerment. Large social movements can be empowering but usually through their local grassroots efforts.
3. The first two recommendations illustrate the validity and utility of a dialectical analysis of empowerment (see examples above under "History of the Concept").
4. Because feeling empowered is not the same as wielding power, focus on empowering behaviors-- such as citizen participation in the community, workplace, and government.
5. Go beyond isolated community programs to empower through policy changes, which require civic and political leaders at all levels to work with empowerment experts, both scholarly and practical (community leaders, advocates).
6. Identify those who can make or affect empowering policies; determine their interests; find information relevant to their interests; provide that information in the most valid, clear and compelling ways.

7. Be proactive, not only in the planning and evaluation stages, but throughout the process, from agenda formation and policy adoption to policy implementation and review.
8. Be a co-learner/collaborator rather than a detached or passive leader, expert, or recipient; leadership training and higher education must adapt to that shift.
9. Cultivate information channels within the policy-making bureaucracy, choosing multiple target audiences (e.g., legislators, voters, interest groups), and share practical information about empowerment, tailored to each one's unique perspective, focus and style.
10. Seek and use personal, organizational and community narratives and other qualitative knowledge about real-world empowering processes. Grassroots community organizing principles of leadership and organizational structure, climate, processes, development and momentum can also inform institutionalized applications of empowerment.

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