Empowerment Theory, Research, and Application

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This introduction to the special issue briefly reviews the meaning and significance of the empowerment concept and problems associated with the proliferation of interest in empowerment. We identify some of the topics not included in this issue and relate those to the many broad and diverse areas of psychological empowerment theory and community-based research and intervention that are covered. We present synopses of each article along with some of the themes and lessons cutting across the frameworks, studies, and applications. These include a wide diversity of settings, fairly representative of empowerment interventions, and, at the same time, improved clarity (if not unanimity) of definitions and measurement, which has been a problem in much empowerment research and intervention.

KEY WORDS: psychological empowerment; community empowerment; community psychology.

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change (Rappaport, 1981, 1984). Empowerment theory, research, and intervention link individual well-being with the larger social and political environment. Theoretically, the construct connects mental health to mutual help and the struggle to create a responsive community. It compels us to think in terms of wellness veruss illness, competence versus deficits, and

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strength versus weaknesses. Similarly empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of cataloging risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems instead of blaming victims. Empowerment-oriented interventions enhance wellness while they also aim to ameliorate problems, provide opportunities for participants to develop knowledge and skills, and engage professionals as collaborators instead of authoritative experts.

Definitions of empowerment abound. We did not ask the authors in this special issue to adhere to any particular definition. We did, however, ask them to carefully consider their own conceptions of empowerment and to make their definitions as clear as possible. Although we urge the reader to compare each article's conceptualization, they all imply that empowerment is more than the traditional psychological constructs with which it is sometimes compared or confused (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, competency, locus of control). The various definitions are generally consistent with empowerment 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" (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989) or simply a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community (Rappaport, 1987), and a critical understanding of their environment (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, Checkoway, 1992).

Theories of empowerment include both processes and outcomes, suggesting that actions, activities, or structures may be empowering, and that the outcome of such processes result in a level of being empowered (Swift & Levin, 1987; Zimmerman, in press). Both empowerment processes and outcomes vary in their outward form because no single standard can fully capture its meaning in all contexts or populations (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 1993). A distinction between empowering processes and outcomes is critical in order to clearly define empowerment theory. Empowering processes for individuals might include participation in community organizations. At the organizational level, empowering processes might include collective decision making and shared leadership. Empowering processes at the community level might include collective action to access government and other community resources (e.g., media). Empowered outcomes refer to operationalizations of empowerment that allow us to study the consequences of empowering processes. Empowered outcomes for individuals might include situation-specific perceived control and resource mobilization skills. When we are studying organizations, outcomes might include development of organizational networks, organizational growth, and policy leverage. Community-level empowerment outcomes might include evidence of pluralism, and existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resources.

Empowerment suggests that participation with others to achieve goals, efforts to gain access to resources, and some critical understandings of the sociopolitical environment are basic components of the construct. Applying this general framework to an organizational level of analysis suggests that empowerment includes organizational processes and structures that enhance member participation and improve goal achievement for the organization. At the community level, empowerment refers to collective action to improve the quality of life in a community and to the connections among community organizations. Organizational and community empowerment, however, are not simply a collection of empowered individuals.

A Growing Yet Unfocused Literature on Empowerment

Interest in empowerment as a research topic started gradually. A search of the psychological literature (PsycLit) from 1974 to 1986 identified 96 articles including the root word "empower," in the title or abstract. From 1987 through 1993, the number increased to 686 journal articles and 283 edited book chapters. Other social sciences have experienced a similar or even greater growth of interest in the topic. A search of sociology-related research (Sociofile) netted 861 articles on empowerment from 1974 through August 1994. In educational research (ERIC), the number of articles on the topic rose from 66 between 1966 and the end of 1981 to an astounding 2,261 from 1982 through March 1994.

As this surfeit of interest and the present issue both make clear, empowerment has become a vital construct for understanding the development of individuals, organizations, and communities (Zimmerman, in press). Thus, in the last 10 or 15 years, empowerment has evolved from the new, paradigm-challenging concept (Kuhn, 1970) to become itself highly popular and mainstream in our discipline and many other fields as well.

We must be wary of restricting community psychology by concentrating too much attention on a single construct. Although empowerment does provide the field with a useful approach for working in communities and is a compelling construct clearly in need of further research, it is not the only approach nor is it a panacea. Efforts to exert control in some contexts may actually create, rather than solve, problems in a person's life. Consider an individual who lives in an oppressive society where organizing one's community around a social issue may result in greater authoritarian control and individual and community disempowerment. Or consider the analogous situation of an urban teenager who tries to exert some control in his neighborhood by confronting a local gang. We need to be more precise about the

construct and research it as thoughtfully as other psychological constructs or it will forever remain a warm and fuzzy, one-size-fits-all, concept with no clear or consistent meaning. This special issue is an attempt to help further specify the usefulness, applicability, and definition of the construct.

The papers in this special issue, which initially grew out of a Biennial Conference on Community Research and Action symposium (Perkins, 1993), only begin to address the critical need for a comprehensive collection and coherent synthesis of current community psychological theory, research, and application of empowerment. It is our aim, however, to advance our understanding of empowerment by specifying theoretical models of the process by which empowerment may develop, by providing research examples of the many contexts and levels of analysis in which empowerment may take place, and by analyzing some very promising empowerment-based approaches to community and organizational intervention. We hope this issue will help the reader to distinguish those approaches from traditional ones as well as the many social programs and policies, both old and new, whose use of empowerment language is mainly empty hype (Perkins, this issue).

Our goal is to push the field to think more clearly about empowerment theory, research, and intervention. In introducing the concept of empowerment to community psychology, Rappaport (1981) offered this advice: "When most people agree with you, worry" (p. 3). We are worried, not because people agree with us, rather because empowerment has perhaps become so ubiquitous that it is actually difficult to avoid. The construct in one form or another appears in academic circles, the political arena, the community development and public health professions, the therapeutic community, and organizational management, to name just a few. At the same time, the construct is often inadequately conceptualized and loosely defined. We believe, however, that this means we need to tighten our thinking and get to work on specifying the construct.

It is the popularity of the concept coupled with its casual usage that provided the impetus for this special issue of the journal. We hope this special issue helps to clarify the empowerment construct by presenting current examples of, and future directions for, empowerment theory, research, and intervention. The issue represents multiple disciplines and levels of analysis by including papers covering community, environmental, applied social, industrial-organizational, developmental, public health, and political contexts. Authors were encouraged to go into lessons learned from their own particular empowerment-related research to give their papers and the issue as a whole more depth, clarity, and practical relevance. As Perkins (this issue) points out, much of the writing done about empowerment often neglects to connect theory with research, and often leaves empowerment-focused interventions without a framework for organizing our knowledge.

THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue provides three significant contributions to the empowerment literature. First, it includes papers that integrate empowerment theory and research. This may be the one area in the empowerment literature that is most lacking. Second, most of the authors in the issue provide compatible guiding principles and models for researchers and practitioners interested in empowerment research and intervention. Third, the special issue enhances our understanding of the construct across several contexts and levels of analysis so that we can more rigorously study empowering processes and develop relevant measures.

Given the wide diversity and sheer numbers of empowerment researchers, we do not pretend to cover the extent of the literature in a single issue. Even so, one of our aims in selecting articles to develop for this issue was to fairly represent the breadth of the empowerment literature relevant to community psychology. We received no less than 30 article idea proposals for this special issue. Those not selected for development overlapped substantially with articles that appear here (e.g., workplace empowerment, health promotion, coalition building, environmental action, and empowerment theory). Thus, based on the ideas submitted to us, we feel that the issue reflects a wide sample of empowerment research and theory in community psychology. Readers will undoubtedly find gaps in the topics presented, but empowerment research cannot be covered adequately in a single issue of a journal. We refer readers to additional collections of empowerment-related articles (e.g., Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Rappaport, 1984; Serrano-Garcia & Bond, 1994; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994). An analysis of empowering aspects of collaborative research methods also deserves special attention elsewhere (see, for example, Fetterman, Kaftarian & Wandersman, 1995). Nevertheless, empowerment methodology is represented in many of the articles in this issue.

The articles included in this issue cut across not only a wide range of content areas, but all stages in the applied research process (conceptualization to research to application). Zimmerman's article focuses on the development of empowerment theory and measurement. He points out that, as an open-ended construct, psychological empowerment takes on different forms in different contexts, populations, and developmental stages and so cannot be adequately captured by a single operationalization, divorced from other situational conditions. He argues that efforts to develop a universal, global measure of empowerment may not be a feasible or appropriate goal. He begins with a theoretical discussion of the differences between empowerment values, empowering processes, and empowered outcomes, which may provide the clearest and most specific criteria for

measuring empowerment. This general framework cuts across individual, organizational, and community levels of analysis. Zimmerman recognizes the interdependence of these levels but emphasizes (individual level) psychological empowerment because it is a goal common to all levels of intervention. The framework presented includes intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components. Research from two different empowering voluntary organizations is used to illustrate both their idiographic measurement differences and their nomothetic theoretical commonalities.

The remaining articles examine various empowerment-based social or organizational interventions. Spreitzer's article separates Zimmerman's concept of intrapersonal empowerment into the four dimensions of meaning (e.g., beliefs, attitudes), competence, self-determination, and impact (or efficacy) and applies it to the field of organizational management. Her research focuses on the specific organizational (work unit) structural and cultural antecedents of workplace empowerment and on empowerment-related outcomes (e.g., innovative behaviors and role effectiveness) for individual middle managers. Her results suggest that the creation of an empowering workplace is not a straightforward proposition. Since business organizations operate differently than voluntary ones, it is critical that the many management scholars and business practitioners interested in workplace empowerment engage in more careful and systematic research as Spreitzer has done.

Maton and Salem's paper views empowerment in general terms as a process enabling individuals, through participation with others, to achieve their primary personal goals. Such a definition appropriately emphasizes individual motivations but also collective action and allows the process to be examined across a variety of community groups, organizations, and settings. They apply this framework in an in-depth analysis of three different types of settings (a religious fellowship, a mutual help organization for the severely mentally ill, and an education program for urban African Americans) in order to identify some of the qualities of those settings which appear to empower their members. In each case, both ethnographic and quantitative research methodologies were used to identify four key empowering organizational characteristics: motivating and challenging positive group belief systems, meaningful opportunity role structures that capitalize upon members' different strengths, an impressive array of economic and social supports, and organizationally and interpersonally talented leaders. the authors note that, especially for settings that are different from the mainstream culture, combining ethnographic with quantitative methodology is important to facilitate collaborative, culturally valid, multilevel, and ecologically sensitive research.

The article by Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, and Wandersman takes a multidisciplinary perspective in describing the different processes that determine the community empowering or disempowering impact of environmental threats, such as negligently operated landfills and industrial plants. They bring an extensive number and variety of environmental protection cases to bear in developing a model of environmental empowerment. Their model distinguishes between "formal empowerment" (or what others have called structural or societal empowerment, in which the larger political decision-making system allows some measure of meaningful local control), "intrapersonal empowerment" (situation-specific individual confidence and competence), "instrumental empowerment" (effective action by the individual via citizen participation), and "substantive" or community or organizational empowerment (effective action by the group). They examine the types of public and private policies and institutions that influence both the ability of a community to mobilize initially and the outcome of empowerment or disempowerment. Putting the values of empowering collaborative research into practice, these authors examine the implications of a partnership approach to community decision making for environmental politics and community building.

The article by Fawcett and his colleagues is an example of making community empowerment theory both broadly and specifically applicable, and thus potentially very practical. They have developed a contextual-behavioral empowerment model and methodology that identifies four main strategies encompassing 33 specific enabling activities, or concrete tactics for promoting community empowerment. Those strategies include enhancing experience and competence, enhancing group structure and capacity, removing social and environmental barriers, and enhancing environmental support and resources. Fawcett's team developed their model to support and evaluate substance abuse prevention programs and, in the present article, use it to monitor the empowerment process in more generally focused community health coalitions.

One of the most prevalent examples of community health promotion coalitions are those organized more specifically around substance abuse prevention. The article by McMillan, Florin, Stevenson, Kerman, and Mitchell traces the rationale behind the broad-based community coalition approach to the public health and primary prevention literature, certain empowerment principles, and an effort to comprehensively engage multiple social systems (e.g., families, schools, workplaces, media, civic organizations) in solving seemingly intractable social, psychological, and health problems. They then evaluate the individual and community organizational-level empowerment effects of a statewide coalition of task forces organized for the prevention of alcohol and other drug problems.

Speer and Hughey draw on their experience with a community organizing network in discussing how the concept of social power and an ecological perspective can illuminate the reciprocal and dialectical nature of empowerment across individual, organizational, and community levels of analysis. They review certain principles and the cyclical phases of community organizing and social action for their relevance to power and empowerment. They then apply Zimmerman's conceptualization (of empowerment processes and outcomes at multiple levels) and Kelly's ecological principles for planning community interventions (interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation, succession) to the field of grass-roots community organizing.

The article by Kroeker explores the personal (material and psychological), organizational, and societal goals of empowerment in the context of an agricultural cooperative in Nicaragua. Her findings are based on 7 months of participant observation focusing on the experience of the worker residents, internal program functioning and structure, and relations to local organizations and to national political forces. The cooperative met the immediate needs of the community and its structure allowed for broad participation in decision making. Sense-making and consciousness-raising processes were also used to facilitate psychological empowerment. The impact on empowerment at higher levels was less clear. Kroeker notes that local service providers often found the cooperative to be poorly organized and not sufficiently empowered. The relationships across levels of organization are complex and not always reciprocal. Despite evidence of empowerment *within* the organization, the opinions and behavior of outsiders and, at the time of data collection in 1989, the macropolitical context had generally detrimental effects for empowerment.

The article by Perkins focuses on the use of empowerment *theory* in the kinds of micro (community) level settings discussed throughout this issue and the use, instead, of empowerment *ideology* at the macro level of social program planning and policy making. His review covers citizen participation in community development and other local grass-roots voluntary associations, competence building primary prevention programs, participatory workplace democracy and other organizational management reforms, institutional reforms in health promotion and public education, legislative and administrative policies at the local, state, and federal levels, and the cooptation of empowerment by conservative ideologues. Perkins then examines some of the obstacles social scientists face in improving the organizational and policy application of empowerment theory and research. He concludes that, despite the vast proliferation of empowerment rhetoric in the championing of social interventions, the explicit connections between policy or program development and empowerment theory and research are in most cases tenuous.

Perkins concludes with 10 recommendations that draw not only on his own review but all the articles in this issue. In sum, he calls for researchers interested in empowerment to recognize and analyze the dialectics of empowerment, to become more familiar and comfortable with the roles and processes of collaboration with policy makers as well as community organizations, and to disseminate more practical, qualitative as well as quantitative, and culturally specific empirical information with an emphasis on the outcomes of empowered behaviors and substantive gains. He finds that smaller, more locally organized interventions generally provide clearer, and possibly more effective, examples of empowerment than do centrally made policies, even those explicitly allowing for local control. He also argues that policy makers, program planners, and researchers should pay greater attention to what models of empowerment work with what populations and in what settings at what levels (individual, organization, community) and why.

The issue closes with a commentary on its themes and contributions and future directions for empowerment theory, research, and intervention by Rappaport, who has been a leader in the conceptualization, research, and practical application of empowerment and related ideas. Rappaport (1981) has argued for the adoption of empowerment as a guiding principle for community psychology. This commentary does more than summarize the themes throughout the issue, although it does that as well. Rappaport takes stock of the recent theoretical, methodological, and empirical work on empowerment in this issue and elsewhere. He then argues that qualitative studies of psychological empowerment based on collaborative methods and communal narratives analyzed at multiple levels can be used to advance our understanding of the processes by which social and personal change occurs. He further argues that viewing narratives as a valuable (and, we would add, renewable) resource might link those processes more effectively with practice in community psychology. We must create settings that promote empowering communal and personal stories and listen more carefully to the voices telling those stories.

In spite of the diversity exhibited in this collection or articles, a few themes merit emphasis. One cannot read these articles without appreciating Rappaport's (1987) argument that the empowerment concept provides a useful general guide for developing preventive interventions in which the participants feel they have an important stake. The articles apply slightly different models of empowerment, but several advocate a partnership approach that uses coalitions of nonprofit organizations to bring government and private service agencies into cooperative relationships with local communities (cf. Fawcett *et al.*; McMillan *et al.*; Rich *et al.*; Speer & Hughey, this issue).

The partnership approach also applies to the relationship between empowerment researchers or program evaluators and program staff and clients/community residents. Although none of the articles in this issue concentrate primarily on the research process, many empowerment studies could provide a methodological model for social research, in general, that is ecologically sensitive (e.g., to social, political, and environmental contexts), based on careful analysis (ideally using multiple methods of both quantitative and qualitative data collection), and consistent with empowerment values (e.g., informants as valued coparticipants in all possible phases of the research process, from planning to dissemination). Empowering research methods thus deserve further attention. For now, we encourage you to read the following articles for their many encouraging ideas that help to clarify the meaning, processes, and outcomes of empowerment even as applications of the concept become more numerous and varied.

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