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What's Wrong with Empowerment¹

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Although it has stimulated useful and important research and theory in community psychology, the concept of empowerment is problematic. This article criticizes two assumptions and values underlying the concept of empowerment: (a) individualism, leading potentially to unmitigated competition and conflict among those who are empowered, and (b) a preference for traditionally masculine concepts of mastery, power, and control over traditionally feminine concerns of communion and cooperation. The challenge to community psychology is to develop a vision that incorporates both empowerment and community, despite the paradoxical nature of these two phenomena.

Community psychologists have long emphasized the importance of context for understanding human behavior. Leaders in our field have persuasively argued that human actors play out their roles in particular environments which offer specific constraints and opportunities and serve as stimuli for action. Yet, despite our awareness of context for those we study, we do not always apply that understanding to ourselves. My purpose here is to point out how our context — that is, the assumptions and values underlying the discipline of psychology in the United States — shape, sometimes without our awareness, how we define and study key ideas in our field.

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To demonstrate this, I focus on the concept of empowerment, a concept at the forefront of community psychology research today. I make two points. First, psychology's emphasis on the cognitive processes of the individual leads us to study individuals' *sense of* empowerment rather than actual increases in power, thereby making the political personal. Second, the concept of empowerment, in accord with psychology's traditional emphasis on agency, mastery, and control, emphasizes concerns that have typically been associated with masculinity and men, rather than concerns typically associated with femininity and women such as community and connections with others.

EMPOWERMENT AND POWER

History and culture shape the concepts that we use to explain human action. Perhaps most important of the values shaping psychology is the belief in individualism, a belief that lies at the heart of psychology's vision of human nature. A great deal of research in psychology rests on the assumption that the healthy individual is one who is self-contained, independent and self-reliant, capable of asserting himself and influencing his environment (and I do mean *his*) and operating according to abstract principles of justice and fairness. Yet, as Sampson (1983) pointed out, "the individual that is psychology's research subject is the creation of a given sociohistorical system" rather than an exemplar of a timeless human nature (p. 46). The supposedly autonomous individual of modern psychology is the product of Western social and economic belief systems, just as our concepts of fairness are shaped by capitalist principles of equity and exchange. Recall Fromm's observation: "The underlying structure of capitalism calls for people who believe themselves to be free agents while they are actually governed by [market] forces that press them this way and that, but behind their backs" (cited in Sampson, 1983, p. 137).

Consider how the belief in individualism affects our conception of empowerment. As Rappaport (1987) presented it, empowerment refers to "a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs" (p. 122). His notion of empowerment is intended to include both a psychological sense of personal control and concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. As Zimmerman (in press) summarized, "Psychological empowerment includes beliefs about one's competence and efficacy, and a willingness to become involved in activities to exert control in the social and political environment. Psychological empowerment is a construct that integrates perceptions of personal control with behaviors to exert control" (pp. 5, 7).

Although these definitions of empowerment include actual control and influence as part of the concept, in a great deal of research actual control is conflated with the *sense of* personal control. For example, in a study of the development of community leaders, Kieffer (1984) described "the fundamental empowering transformation . . . from sense of self as helpless victim to acceptance of self as assertive and efficacious citizen," whereas Ozer and Bandura (1990) consider empowerment a manifestation of people's belief in their efficacy. Sampson (1983) has pointed out psychology's tendency to reduce complex phenomena to individual psychological dynamics:

Effort is expended in developing precise ways to measure and assess individual psychological states and perceptions and to evaluate individual behavioral outcomes. The social context within which these individual perceptions and activities take place is put off to the side, occasionally alluded to, but rarely if ever systematically addressed. (p. 12)

Sampson here was criticizing psychological research on justice, yet his comments apply as well to the predilection in community psychology to assess empowerment through individuals' perceptions.

This proclivity stems from a deeper unresolved tension within psychology between two views of human nature, one which holds that "reality creates the person" (as reflected, e.g., in behaviorism) and the opposing view that "the person creates reality" (as reflected, e.g., in cognition) (see Buss, 1978; Sampson, 1983). Many agree that the cognitivist perspective currently dominates American psychology (Baars, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Segal & Lachman, 1972; cf. Friman, Allen, Kerwin, & Larzelere, 1993). Central to this viewpoint is the belief that structures and processes within the individual's mind are the primary determinants of behavior. "For cognitivism, it is more important to understand what is going on within the person's head as she or he confronts an objective stimulus situation than it is to understand the properties of the situation itself" (Sampson, 1983, p. 87).

The consequence of the cognitivist perspective is to ignore or downplay the influence of situational or social structural factors in favor of a focus on individual perceptions. But this view artificially disconnects human behavior from the larger sociopolitical context, resulting in a search within the self for solutions to human problems (Caplan & Nelson, 1973; Prilleltlesky, 1989). In the context of empowerment, if the focus of inquiry becomes not actual power but rather the *sense of* empowerment, then the political is made personal and, ironically, the status quo may be supported.

Placing primacy on the phenomenology of the individual ignores the possibility of what Marxists deem "false consciousness." The individual's experience of power or powerlessness may be unrelated to actual ability to influence, and an increase in the sense of empowerment does not always reflect an increase in actual power. Indeed, a sense of empowerment may be an illusion when so much of life is controlled by the politics and practices at a macro level. This does not mean that individuals can have no influence or that individuals' perceptions are unimportant, but rather that to reduce power to individual psychology ignores the political and historical context in which people operate. Confusing one's actual *ability* to control resources with a *sense of* empowerment depoliticizes the latter.

Theoreticians of power distinguish *power over* ("explicit or implicit dominance") from *power to* ("the opportunity to act more freely within some realms . . . through power sharing") and *power from* ("the ability to resist the power of others by effectively fending off their unwanted demands") (Hollander & Offermann, 1990, p. 179). The concept of empowerment is sometimes used in a way that confounds a sense of efficacy or esteem (part of "power to") with that of actual decision-making control over resources ("power over"). Many intervention efforts aimed at empowerment increase people's power to act, for example, by enhancing their self-esteem, but do little to affect their power over resources or policies. For example, a program designed to enhance the academic success of African American college students is described as "Empowerment of African American college students." Students in the program earn higher grade point averages than comparable students not in the program, a considerable achievement (Maton, 1993). Yet this program does not address control over decision making. Although self-esteem or achievement may be related to power and control, these concepts are not the same. To consider them the same is to depoliticize the concept of empowerment.

The question arises, then, whether attempts to enhance a sense of empowerment create the illusion of power without affecting the actual distribution of power. Many interventions attempt to achieve empowerment through increasing individuals' participation in neighborhood or self-help groups. Empowerment is sometimes equated with participation, as if changing procedures will automatically lead to changes in the context or in the distribution of resources. Lewis (1994) criticized this claim in his discussion of reforms in urban education. Some changes, such as the institution of local school councils, appear to be empowering in that they give local groups more control over schools. But viewed from a larger perspective, these changes in procedure do little to affect the distribution of resources in school systems. People who participate in community organizations often feel more empowered than nonparticipants (e.g., Zimmerman, Israel,

Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992), but participation does not necessarily result in more influence or control. Chavis and Wandersman (1990) found that although people developed a greater *sense of* control through participation in a neighborhood organization, they did not perceive the group as becoming more powerful over time.

Neighborhood groups are embedded in larger forces and institutions that are nonlocal and often not susceptible to local influence (Hunter & Riger, 1986). For example, Brenner (1973) has tracked the relationship between macrolevel economic fluctuations and their microlevel impact on rates of mental hospital incarcerations. Realtors, developers, banks, mortgage institutions, and other market forces, as well as local, state, and federal governments and their agencies, often affect neighborhood dynamics in ways that are difficult if not impossible for local grass-roots groups to influence. Community organizing efforts have a long history in the United States, from those of Jane Addams to Saul Alinsky and contemporary attempts to change neighborhoods through group efforts. Molotch (1973) concluded, in a review of these efforts, that the local internal sources of change have generally been relatively unsuccessful in the light of larger, external forces of change. If interventions aimed to empower do not address these larger sociopolitical forces, they may be doomed to transitory or ineffective actions. On the other hand, attempts to address these issues may bring involvement in partisan politics which may put other constraints on psychologists' effectiveness.

A paper by Serrano-Garcia (1984) gave a poignant description of the inextricable relationship of empowerment and politics. Her group, affiliated with the university and the community mental health center, attempted an intervention in a poor Puerto Rican community. The intervention failed to reach many of its goals in part because it did not address the central issue in Puerto Rico, its political status. Members of the intervention team held a proindependence view on this issue, yet they did not reveal their political preferences to the community. Serrano-Garcia asked

1) If we maintain our partisan anonymity will the community feel betrayed? 2) If a particular group of residents chooses to work with us, and their political partisanship is well known, should we refuse, or should we accept? Does our supposed neutrality hinder our consciousness-raising efforts by forcing us to remain outside of partisan political issues? (p. 195)

These difficult questions bring to the fore the relationship between community psychology's concept of empowerment and the larger political arena within which empowerment efforts operate.

Any serious attempt to gain power (that is, power over) by those who are disempowered will prompt those who see themselves as losing power to fight back. Increasing control over resources may be permitted only until

it becomes threatening to the dominant group. In reflecting on her intervention efforts, Serrano-Garcia concluded

I am convinced that our project achieved the goals it did because its goals and strategies were and are unknown to people in power, because we are working with low-status people who are not recognized as a threat, and because we did not choose to deal with problems which directly confront governmental institutions (p. 198)

Gruber and Trickett (1987) raised this issue in the context of organizational change efforts when they asked "Can we empower others?" Empowerment requires a redistribution in power, but the institutional structure that puts one group in a position to empower others also works to subvert the process of empowerment. In their study of a school's attempt to share decision making, they found that the sense of empowerment increased among students and parents, and students had greater opportunities to affect the curriculum (that is, power to), but few changes occurred in the distribution of power over, that is, in the structural distribution of power in the school. The broader context of the empowerment effort, in which control rested with teachers, undermined attempts to equalize power.

Underlying empowerment ideology is a conflict model that assumes that a society consists of separate groups possessing different levels of power and control over resources (Gutierrez, 1990). "Empowerment is by definition concerned with many who are excluded by the majority society on the basis of their demographic characteristics or of their physical or emotional difficulties, experienced either in the past or the present" (Rappaport, 1990). The outsiders compete with the insiders — and with each other — for control of resources. Livert (n.d.) raised the problem that empowerment of all underrepresented or needy groups merely increases the competition for the same resources. Empowered individuals' rational pursuit of their own best interests may end in the destruction of neighborhoods and networks of support. His solution is to balance empowerment with a commitment to the community, thereby strengthening both individuals and the community as a whole. Bond and Keys (1993) presented a hopeful example of collaboration between two potentially conflicting groups on the board of a community agency: parents and community members. Critical to their collaboration was a culture that appreciated interdependencies and the existence of people and structures that spanned the groups' boundaries.

Empowerment of all disenfranchised groups could be dangerous. I think it is instructive that empowerment is favored not only by those who would describe themselves as politically progressive but also by those who would describe themselves as conservative such as the Republican politician Jack Kemp, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, whose

political group is called Empower America. There are some groups of outsiders that one hopes would become less empowered, rather than more powerful. For example, neo-Nazi's might be considered outsiders, marginal to mainstream society, yet few community psychologists would advocate their empowerment.

EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY

The underlying assumption of empowerment theory is that of conflict rather than cooperation among groups and individuals, control rather than communion. The image of the empowered person (or group) in research and theory reflects the belief in psychology in separation, individuation, and individual mastery (for criticisms, see Sarason, 1981). Gilligan (1982) contrasted this view of human nature with an alternate vision that emphasized relatedness and interdependence as central values of human experience. Although I disagree with Gilligan's assertion that these two modes are distributed along gender lines, I concur with her claim that psychology takes as its highest value the emphasis on autonomy and separation over relationality. The mature adult in psychological research is characterized by mastery, control, and separation, rather than interdependence or relatedness. Community psychology's emphasis on empowerment follows the pattern of placing primacy on agency, mastery, and control over connectedness.

Since Freud asserted that a mentally healthy individual was one who could work and love, psychologists have contrasted agency with communion. Bakan (1966) was one of the first contemporary psychologists to make this distinction (see also Carlson, 1971; Guttman, 1970). In his book *The Duality of Human Existence*, Bakan defined agency as an individual acting in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion while communion refers to an individual's sense of being part of a larger whole, at one with others. "Agency manifests itself in the urge to master, communion in contractual cooperation" (p. 15). He further hypothesized that agency and communion are linked to gender. In his view, men's achievement strivings are directed at agentic concerns of self-assertion, attainment of status, and mastery over the environment. In contrast, women strive to achieve communion and are motivated to work cooperatively to attain a sense of harmony with others. However, Bakan did not define the concepts of agency and communion as bipolar opposites, but as separate, independent dimensions capable of co-existing within one person.

Although Bakan's formulation of agency and communion is quite broad, the sociologist Parson's (1951, Parsons & Shils, 1952, see also Bales, 1970, Johnson, 1988) earlier distinction between instrumental and expressive activity is more specific, and thus potentially more useful. In Parson's formulation, instrumental actions are attempts to control the environment whereas expressive actions are directed toward interpersonal relationships. Parsons did not use these terms as personality descriptors. Rather, the concepts of instrumentality and expressiveness refer to the way individuals interact in social systems. Instrumental activity focuses on achievement and accomplishment outside the immediate social group. In contrast, expressive activity is directed at the interpersonal interactions that exist within the group. Hence, expressive actions manifest the principles of Bakan's concept of communion, while instrumental actions manifest those of agency. Similar to Bakan, Parsons did not view instrumental and expressive behaviors as two ends of the same continuum. Rather, he stressed the need for both expressive and instrumental roles in both individuals and in social groups.

Considerable research in psychology has adhered to the distinction between these two realms of behavior, namely, the agentic/instrumental, "doing" realm and the communal/expressive, "feeling" realm. With the advent of feminist theorizing and the growing area of research focusing on the psychology of women, it has become obvious that this simple dichotomy is inadequate. Feminists have pointed out that the two domains are not equally valued in our society. Instrumental behavior is highly valued and defines what is conventionally considered to be success. Expressiveness, associated with dependency, has traditionally had a negative connotation when used to characterize individuals. Miller (1976), in her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, pointed out that women are punished for making relationships and connections central in their lives, although, as Gilligan (1982) emphasized, relatedness is critical to understanding women's moral actions. Yet this emphasis on women's relationality echoes the traditional concept of "separate spheres" in which woman is defined by her ties with others (Kerber, 1986), ignoring the variability that exists among women (and men). Linking some behaviors to women and others to men obscures the fact that behavior itself has no gender and can be manifested by either sex.

The concept guiding much of community psychology's work today, that of empowerment, follows the stream of research and theory which emphasizes agency, mastery, and control. Like that previous research, it tends to deny or overlook the role of connectedness in human life. I find this particularly ironic since an early and influential *phenomenon of interest* (in Rappaport's, 1987, phrase) in community psychology was the "sense of

community" (Sarason, 1974), a concept that has been overshadowed recently by the emphasis on empowerment. My point is not that the study of community and connectedness should now supersede the study of empowerment, but rather that both are integral to human well-being and happiness and to well-functioning communities, and that both ought to be the objects of our study. However, little work has been done to integrate these two ideas.

Research on rape victims demonstrates the importance of both concepts to understanding human behavior. Contrast two victims: the first, Migael Scherer (1992), a white middle-class woman raped and nearly strangled one morning in a laundromat by a stranger. Scherer's experience, documented in her book, *Still Loved by the Sun: A Rape Survivor's Journal*, included encounters with sensitive police, doctors, and judges who believed her completely, skillful rape victim advocates and therapists, supportive family and friends, and so forth. She made full use of rape counseling advocates and other social services and she did not hesitate to prosecute the rapist (who was then convicted). Scherer eloquently described the feelings of smallness and vulnerability, the inability to plan more than one day at a time, and the confusion, sleeplessness, and agitation that persist long after a rape. Scherer's account is a moving description of the process by which one woman came to feel empowered and efficacious again.

Contrast her experience with that of Altavese Thomas, a poor black mother of three, gang-raped while drinking with some women friends in a poor, high-crime neighborhood. Thomas was portrayed by Michelle Fine (1992) in her critique of the view prevalent in social psychological research that "Taking-Control-Yields-Coping" (p. 62). Thomas refused to use the criminal justice system or to rely on kin. Fine argued that:

trusting social institutions, maximizing interpersonal supports, and engaging in self-disclosure are strategies most appropriate for middle-class and affluent individuals whose interests are served by those institutions, whose social supports can multiply available resources and contacts, and for whom self-disclosure may in fact lead not only to personal change but also to structural change (p. 69).

Scherer was in such a position: Her life circumstances permitted control and empowerment to be her primary goals in reestablishing her sense of trust in the world after the rape. She regained a sense of control in part through prosecution of the rapist, a strategy that might be considered to reflect empowerment or agency.

Thomas refused to prosecute the rapists. Her choice stemmed, however, not from a low "sense of empowerment" but because relatedness and connections took priority for her given the likelihood of retaliation if she prosecuted. The circumstances of her life did not permit the actions usually

considered essential for self-efficacy. Her behavior can best be understood in light of a need to protect her family. Such a need was not necessary in Scherer's case, since that protection existed already. Considering empowerment and control as the optimal goal for a rape victim denies the reality of Thomas's circumstances. Likewise, empowerment and control may not be the appropriate goal in all community situations.

According to Hare-Mustin and Maracek (1986), autonomy and relatedness are a function not of one's gender but rather of one's position in a social hierarchy. The highly valued attributes that our society defines as agentic are those associated with power and status because autonomy and mastery require the freedom to make choices. Those not in a position of autonomy and choice must focus on connection and communal goals to survive. Accordingly, whether individuals act in an autonomous manner or operate in a communal mode reflects their relative position in the social structure. The implication is that once those lower on the hierarchy have moved up, they may move from a relatedness mode to operate on principles of autonomy and individual agency.

The focus for community psychologists ought to be on understanding how community shapes the person, in particular, on the conditions that facilitate both efficacy or personal control and also a sense of community. Paradoxically, situations which foster community may be the opposite of those which foster empowerment. Community may exist most cohesively when people experience a shared externally generated fate such as a crisis or disaster, or a condition of poverty or oppression (Panzetta, 1973). Alienation and a sense of separateness may result from the absence of crisis or stress, or from access to sufficient resources to cope by oneself. The psychological sense of community that is advocated as a goal by Sarason (1974) and others may be a function of interdependence on a material level. Ironically, when interdependence is no longer necessary, then the psychological sense of community may disappear as well.

Stack's (1974) book, *All Our Kin*, gives a moving example of this dilemma. The poor people whom she interviewed participated in daily domestic exchanges of services, goods, and money that enabled them to survive fluctuations in welfare and the exigencies of living. At the same time, the rules both of the welfare system and of the exchange network prohibited them from acquiring any surplus that might enable them to improve their economic condition or life situation. A woman in the exchange network received an unexpected inheritance of \$1,500 with which she and her husband hoped to make a down payment on a home. Within a month and a half, however, the money was gone, distributed to kin for compelling reasons such as a train ticket to visit a sick relative, payment for a burial, and new winter clothing for the children. Another couple had withdrawn

from the network to preserve their resources when they had acquired steady jobs, and they had bought a house and furniture. Some years later, when their marriage was dissolving, the woman began giving some of her nice clothes and furniture away to her sisters and niece. She was reestablishing her place in the exchange network by obligating others to her, creating insurance against future need. The sense of community among these people was very great. They had a strong network which could be relied upon in time of trouble. It is important to note, however, that the network which enabled them to survive also put constraints on their survival. Finding one's voice, controlling one's resources, becoming empowered may reduce the interdependence that produces a strong sense of community.

There may, however, be circumstances in which the two phenomena are not contradictory. Chavis and Wandersman (1990) suggest that sense of community is related to participation in a neighborhood association, similar to Maton and Rappaport's (1984) finding that development of a psychological sense of community and commitment were related to empowerment for members of a religious organization. Leavitt and Saegert's (1990) research on leaders in cooperative housing projects in Harlem found that shared control was the basis for empowerment. They concluded:

Cooperatively organized endeavors of different kinds should be explored more thoroughly as means of empowering as well as serving low-income people. The real level of control a person can have over life in this society correlates highly with disposable income. The development of a co-op sector could be an alternative to the prospect that large numbers of people will be able to exert less and less control over the services and work on which they depend. (p. 231)

There is a danger, however, that community or empowerment can be substituted as a goal when what people actually need is better jobs and more income.

Zimmerman (in press) refers to organizations such as those studied by Leavitt and Saegert as "empowered organizations (i.e., those that influence the policy process and remain viable over time)" as distinct from "empowering organizations (i.e., those that contribute to the development of psychological empowerment)." While it is theoretically possible for organizations to do both simultaneously, there are difficult choices between these two goals that need to be made as organizations grow. Elsewhere I describe the dilemmas faced by some feminist organizations, such as rape crisis centers or battered women's centers started in the 1960s as part of the Women's Liberation Movement. They began as egalitarian groups, focused not only on providing services but also on sharing leadership and developing the skills of their members. As these organizations became successful, the demand for their services increased. The need for efficiency conflicted

with the time-consuming process of collective decision making, and the organizations were forced to choose between widespread participation and meeting the growing demands for services. These dilemmas, which I call the "challenges of success," highlight the contradictions between the development of community and the empowerment of individuals (Riger, in press).

If empowerment of the disenfranchised is the primary value, then what is to hold together societies made up of different groups? Competition among groups for dominance and control without the simultaneous acknowledgment of common interests can lead to a conflict like we see today in the former Yugoslavia. One of the primary tasks for community psychology, then, is to articulate the relationship between empowerment and community. Does empowerment of disenfranchised people and groups simultaneously bring about a greater sense of community and strengthen the ties that hold our society together, or does it promote certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, increasing competitiveness and lack of cohesion?

The empowered individual in community psychology need not be the individual in isolation or even in groups, fighting with others for power and control. Rather, we should consider connection as important as empowerment. This conception of community, however, challenges the belief in individual rights and freedoms which is the cornerstone of the political philosophy on which notions of empowerment rest. Pure liberalism places primacy on individual rights, not corporate or community rights. A community psychology aimed at empowerment of the individual very much accords with our dominant political philosophy.

Group or community development inevitably will clash, at some point, with that of the individual, and the empowerment of one person or group will conflict with that of another. The challenge to community psychology is to articulate a vision that encompasses not only empowerment but also community, a vision that can address the question asked by Rodney King: "Can't we all get along?" To answer this question, we need to consider differences but also similarities, those things that separate and also those we have in common; agency and also communion; empowerment and also community.

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