

Fitzsimons, Annette



Empowerment and Participation in Youth Work

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Chapter 1

What is empowerment?

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you meet the following National Occupational Standards:

- 1.1.2 Enable young people to work effectively in groups
- 1.4.1 Provide information and support to young people
- 1.1.5 Support young people in taking action and to tackle problems

It will also introduce you to the following academic standards as set out in the QAA youth and community work benchmark statement (2009).

- 5.1.2 Fostering democratic and inclusive practice

The aim of this chapter is to explore empowerment – a term which is currently used in youth and community work and throughout the caring professions as a strategy for including people into the decision-making processes of organisations and communities. The extent of this inclusion can refer to participation on committees, to influencing decision making or to the control of resources. It is also an internal process, whereby individuals develop and change their self-concept, perhaps by improving their levels of confidence. These two processes are interconnected; individuals may not be able to participate in empowering organisational processes unless they perceive themselves as being able to do so.

CASE STUDY

Empowering process?

Susie is an active member of the local youth club. She attends most drop-in sessions and has recently started helping out as a volunteer.

CASE STUDY continued

The youth centre is recruiting new staff members. They have developed a process for ensuring that young people are genuinely involved in the interview process. Susie is invited to be on the interview panel. She will be interviewing the candidates along with three other young people and one worker.

On the day, Susie is very quiet. When asked her opinion, she waits for others to speak. She goes along with what others say. She does not seem to know what she thinks. The workers are not sure whether she agrees with the final decision, although she says that she does.

Has the youth club been empowering? Which aspects of empowerment have they focussed on?

The term 'empowerment' has been increasingly used by social and healthcare professionals, researchers and activists since the 1970s and though historically its roots are radical and revolutionary, it is used increasingly in liberal and consumerist and managerialist discourse (see Quinn and Davies, 1999), thus producing conflicts and contradictions for practitioners.

A series of literature reviews of the term (see, for example, Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995; Page and Czuba, 1999) point out the ways in which the term increasingly lacks clarity and precision. Indeed, the majority of writings on the term begin with the problem of definition (see Rappaport, 1984; Servian, 1996; Payne, 1997; Adams, 2003; Thompson, 2007). These critical accounts are very useful, in that a number of issues are beginning to emerge through this work, which can help practitioners to begin applying the concept with increasing confidence.

So what is empowerment? How can it be measured and evaluated? Is it a set of values or a series of outcomes? Does it only pertain to an individual or can a group or an organisation become empowered? And if so, how do you know that this has happened and how can you help groups and individuals to achieve this? To address these questions, this chapter seeks to explore some of the issues which emerge in attempting to define the term. One of the first problems encountered in the literature is that empowerment is referred to as a theory, as a process and as a concept. It might be useful to consider the difference between a theory and a concept before we embark on an exploration of the term.

Empowerment: theory, concept or process

A theory is an explanation of some phenomenon or event, whereas a concept is a part of this explanation. A theory is composed of a series of concepts which are linked in a logical fashion to provide an explanation of a 'thing'; for example, the theory of internal combustion. There are a number of concepts (parts), such as

engine parts, oil, air filters and fan belts, which need to be placed together in a certain pattern in order for the theory to operate, or in this case, for the car to start. The process would be the operation of the car, the technology at work. Although this example relates to a machine, and empowerment is anything but mechanistic, it is useful in illustrating the distinction between theory, concept and process. Rather than considering empowerment as either a theory or a concept, it is perhaps more useful to consider it as a process by which groups and individuals feel empowered to achieve, to participate and to overcome their lack of power and control.

The term began to appear in the 1970s in literature on development and gender. It then began to be used by academics in psychology, sociology, educational and organisational research as a strategy for the development of individuals, communities and organisations. Throughout this literature, the key terms that empowerment is posed against are 'oppression', 'powerlessness', 'control' and 'marginalisation', and it can be viewed as *A process of increasing interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situation* (Gutierrez, 1990, page 149).

The core of the term empowerment is this contrast to the operation of power and many studies attempt to explore the complexity of empowerment by outlining theories of power (see Thompson, 2007).

'Power' is a useful starting point, as is an understanding of the different insights which alternative definitions provide. Power is commonly conceptualised as pertaining to politics, politicians and governments who make laws and exercise control over citizens. When a parent forbids their child to do something, or an employer reprimands a worker, this too is an exercise of power. Power, just like empowerment, is a difficult subject of study as it is an *essentially contested concept*. This means that there are different ways of conceptualising power, that definitions are disputed and usually depend on the theoretical approach adopted by the writer. So the following sections will explain the work of some of the key writers on the topic, beginning with the work of Max Weber (1864–1920).

Power and authority

In contemporary society, it is important to differentiate between power and authority. Past societies can be identified which operated with one or the other, but this clear cut distinction is blurred in the organisation of current liberal democratic nation states. The distinction between authority and power is used by Weber to refer to authority as legitimised power. For him, the idea of power without authority is: *The probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his (sic) own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests* (Weber, 1947, page 152).

Authority exists when citizens give their consent and accept the authority of others as legitimate. This exercise of power is based on legitimate authority and not on coercion. Max Weber explores three sources of legitimacy for authority and power.

- Traditional authority, which is an established belief in authority of, for example, the 'divine right of kings'.
- Charismatic authority, which can be obedience to an exceptional individual as they are deemed to possess inspirational characteristics, for example, Jesus Christ, Chairman Mao. Such people acquire positions of authority over others on the basis of their personal qualities.
- Rational legal authority, where power is given to those who uphold an office or position, for example, a traffic warden, a judge, a manager. The exercise of power is not based on the personal qualities of the person but on the legitimacy of the office.

So, in Weber's view the rational exercise of power is based on legitimate authority. Is this, however, the only way power operates in society?

ACTIVITY 1.1

Spend a couple of minutes thinking about your organisation.

Who has power? Who is powerful?

Is it the manager? The Management Committee? The staff team? The volunteers? The young people? The funding body? The local residents?

Where does their power come from? Do they have authority? Does it fit with Weber's three sources of legitimacy? Can you think of any other ways that power might operate?

Foucault's Concept of Power

Foucault's (1926–1984) analysis of the relationship between power, discursive practices and subjectivity provides a number of conceptual tools from which to reformulate theories of power. These theoretical resources can contribute to the debate on empowerment and help with a clearer definition. His analysis of power is in contrast to one that views power as something that is possessed, something that some people possess, and not others. Foucault says of conceptualisations of power such as these, that

it allows power to be only ever thought of in negative terms: refusal, delimitation, obstruction, censure. Power is that which says no. Any confrontation with power thus conceived appears only as transgression. The manifestation of power takes on the pure form of 'thou shalt not'.

(Foucault, 1979, page 53)

Arising from his critique of this way of formulating power in society, Foucault outlines a different way of thinking about power. If power is always about domination, it is posed

only in terms of constitutions, sovereignty etc., hence in juridical terms; (and) on the Marxist side, in terms of the state apparatus. (Then) The way in which it was exercised concretely and in detail, with its specificity, its techniques and tactics was not looked for; one contented oneself with denouncing it in a polemical and global manner, as it existed among the 'others' in the adversary's camp: power in soviet socialism was called totalitarianism by its opponents, and in Western capitalism it was denounced by Marxists as class domination, but the mechanics of power were never analysed.

(Foucault, 1979, page 34)

Rather than concentrating on the negative, repressive aspects of power, Foucault argues that if this was the only story about power, it cannot explain what he terms the productivity of power – the way power *produces things ... induces pleasure ... forms knowledge ... produces discourse* (1979, page 36). Foucault's critique and analysis allows a more liberating or emancipatory analysis of power, which is a central dimension of empowerment. Rather than viewing power as a possession, Foucault views power as running through the social network; producing effects; as productive, rather than negative. He says that:

What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply the fact that it does not simply weigh like a force which says no, but that it runs through, and it produces, things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge [savoir], it produces discourses; it must be considered as a productive network that runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

(Interview in Morris and Patton, 1979, page 36)

This includes the recognition that whenever two or more people are engaged in some activity, power conflicts and struggles are involved. This means, however, that young people, socially excluded groups or marginalised individuals are also involved in the exercise of power. Rather than viewing power with unease, or simply in terms of control, as coercion, as a negative concept, the fact that everyone has and exercises power means that power cannot simply be located with particular groups in society. Foucault's 'new' concept of power provides the possibility of enabling a productive discourse on power, which could be used to explore the empowerment in ways that can be progressive and liberating.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Do you think that power can be liberating?

Can you find examples within your practice to back up this perspective?

What, for you, are the connections between power and empowerment?

Nancy Fraser (1989) also puts forward a positive reading of Foucault on power, arguing that his analysis enables power to be analysed at the micro level, at the level of everyday practices, and turns the focus away from power as residing with the state or with the economy. Jana Sawicki (1991) makes similar points in her discussion of Foucault and power. She analyses the ways in which his concept of power differs from traditional conceptions, which concentrate on power as dominance, as repression, and discusses the exercise and productivity of power in relation to identity, sexuality and the body.

Foucault's work has been hugely important for the reformulation of the place of the individual/subject within structures of power and dominance. One important theme is the notion of resistance to the imposition of power and the impetus for empowerment. What determines individual resistance and complicity is very difficult to analyse, and with the development of psychoanalytic theory it is clear that one cannot address this problem only in terms of sociological theory. The questions of desires, identity, fantasy, resilience and fear all have to be addressed, as would the ways in which individual personal histories intersect with both structures and discourses. In this way subjectivity and agency are marked with difference.

Based on this formulation, it is possible to explore the effect of a number of discourses in the production of empowerment in practice. This is an alternative approach to theorising empowerment, which can provide a contrast to the accounts of power that pose the problem in terms either at the level of the economy, the State, or the individual. Rather than deny the power of these structures – as Foucault says 'I don't want to say that the State isn't important', rather,

The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth. True these networks stand in a conditioning-conditioned relationship to a kind of 'meta-power' which is structured essentially round a certain number of great prohibition functions; but this meta-power with its prohibitions can only take hold and secure its footing where it is rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power.

(Foucault, 1979, page 39)

This dimension to Foucault's theory of power is often overlooked. The focus is on his discussion of the individual exercise of power, power at the micro level rather than at the macro level of the operation of power throughout society. If all elements of Foucault's writings on power are taken into account, then it cannot be contrasted with Weber in any simplistic way. One of the important insights into the operation of power that Foucault provides is the account of power operating throughout society and as located not only in the state but also in the individual. The work of another theorist can be used as a way of combining all of these facets of power.

Steven Lukes in his book *Power: A Radical View* (1974) argues that there are at least three dimensions or ways of analysing how power is exercised in modern societies. The first dimension Lukes defines as:

the ability of A to prevail over B in formal political decision-making (normally in government) on one or more key issues; where there is a direct and observable conflict between A and B over outcomes.

(1974, cited in Cox et al., 1985, page 32)

Power here is taken to mean the ability of one formal office holder to shape the final outcome of government. This definition of power corresponds to a pluralist view of power, and it is based on the assumption that:

- Power is diffuse, held by many groups.
- Groups compete for power.
- Different groups exercise power in different areas.
- Groups are open to new members and outside influence.
- The state (administrative apparatus) is a neutral arbiter between different groups.

Pluralists do not compare the relative power of different groups or the degree of influence they have on the state.

Lukes' (1974) second dimension is defined as:

the ability of A to prevail over B in determining the outcomes of observable conflicts of interests in formal decision-making and also in determining what is to count as a formal issue, where there is a conflict of interests over policy preferences and observable grievances over these preferences outside the political system.

(1974, cited in Cox et al., 1985, page 32)

All decisions are likely to be of importance to some group or interest in society. However, some groups are strategically placed so that they can ensure that all issues which threaten them are resolved in their favour. In other words, elite groups in society either inside or outside the political system can continuously use their influence or presence in the system to determine the outcome of those issues that are important to them.

- Power is concentrated in the hands of a few.
- Dominant group is unified by background and beliefs.
- This group makes all the important decisions.
- This group is closed to new members.

Power in this second dimension is not seen as flowing directly from the public through to government. Instead power is exercised by those in the top positions

of major institutions in society. This formulation corresponds to the elite theory of power. The two 'founders' Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941) together with Robert Michels (1911) would insist that the idea of a classless society or of participatory democracy are simply idealist delusions. So they divide society into key social institutions such as parliament, civil service, judiciary, church, armed forces, business, finance, press and universities; each of these is run by an elite who have developed excellence in these particular areas, and these elites substantially control the political process.

Before exploring Lukes' third dimension, it is relevant to bring in theory from C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist who produced an analysis of power entitled *The Power Elite* (1956). In this, it was argued that the three dominant spheres of influence in American society are the political, the military and the industrial and that these areas are increasingly interdependent on each other. This interdependence is reinforced by the fact that the top staff of these elites are drawn from a common social and education background and are often connected by kinship and marriage. Interchange of top personnel between each sector means there is a power elite dominating in the three areas. Similar studies by Ralph Miliband of the British state (1982, 1983) demonstrate the connections between elite groups, which are strengthened through intermarriage, shared cultural background, activities and education.

Power here is conceived much more in terms of a division between the 'haves' or the 'have nots', though C. Wright Mills (1956) argues that below these elites (see Figure 1.1) lie competing interest groups and then the disempowered masses.

The simplicity of Mill's view is attractive, but it denies the majority of people any power at all.

Let's now turn to Steve Lukes' (1974) third dimension of power which he defines as:

the ability of A to prevent B from realising his (sic) 'real' interests or from articulating them effectively due to the mobilisation of bias resulting from the institutional structure of society.

(1974, cited in Cox et al., 1985, page 32)

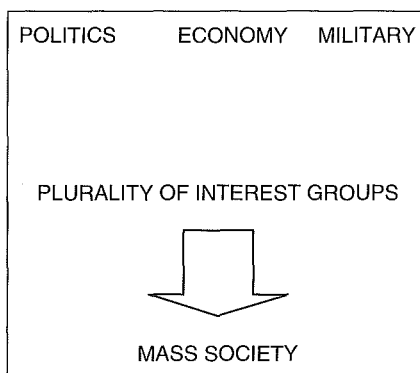


Figure 1.1 Power elite

In this view, power is equated not just with who decides but with the way in which the economic and social structure of capitalist society conditions human thought and action, so that individuals never understand their 'real' interests. In this formulation, power can only be analysed by first asking the question of where people's ideas of reality and their desires come from, which directs one to the underlying structure of the capitalist system. It is this structure which predetermines individual thought and action such that fundamental threats to the system are not only contained but also that people are incapable of realising that they could either want to change the system, or indeed to actually change it. This third dimension corresponds to a Marxist analysis of power, in that the class which holds the material resources of production also control mental production (creation of intellectual ideas) as explained by the following passage:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

(Marx and Engels, 1965, page 60)

This approach maintains that there is a class structure whereby the owning classes dominate the working classes and that politics and the state reflect this structure. It argues that elite theorists inadequately analyse this fundamental structure, because it is not simply a question of elites but a question of a ruling class. The State, which is the instrument of this ruling class, is the real basis of power relations. Parliamentary politics or workplace democracy would be viewed as 'ideologically' significant rather than being of any fundamental significance as it gives the illusion that people can exercise real political choices and power.

Thus, there are distinct theoretical approaches suggested by Lukes' (1974) analysis of power, which could, for simplicity, be categorised as liberal, pluralist and socialist/Marxist.

The concept of discourse

There are a number of approaches to the study of discourse; and the terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' will have very different meanings depending upon the theoretical approach of the writer. Rather than discourse analysis, the concept of discourse that is used here is the one that is based on Foucault's view of discourse as knowledge.

For Foucault, discourses are anything that can carry meaning. Language, images, stories, scientific narratives and cultural products are, therefore, all discourses; but also social practices like constructing 'youth' as a time of transition, freedom to explore, the idea that youth is about freedom, mobility, an ideal time, a fantasy

of having a good time in contrast with adult state of responsibilities. In Foucault's account, discourses are not a reflection of already existing differences between people but the means by which these differences are produced. Our subjectivities are formed out of the self-understandings that we gain from encountering these publicly available discourses. For Foucault, not only does the scope of discourse expand beyond that of language, the discourses we have available to us, regarding, for example, masculinity or femininity, are multiple, contradictory and subject to variation and change. Think of the multiplicity of discourses of masculinity and femininity: hysterical woman, women governed by hormones, superwoman, mother, whore, feminist woman, butch dyke, strong black woman; rational man, repressed man, violent and dominating man, gentle father, new man, queen, real gentleman, loyal husband. These discourses are dynamic and our identities are constituted from negotiating them along with others, for example, Irish woman, working class grammar school girl, lesbian, African, socialist, musician, and so on. In this negotiation for Foucault, young people participate in the production of discourses and thereby in the production of themselves.

For Foucault, discourses are tied to power. He understands power not only in the sense of state and structural power but also as something which is pervasive and operates throughout all relations within society via discursive understandings. So, for example, certain gender discourses make possible and reinforce power relations between men and women, discourses for example which construct men as stronger or more rational. In the negotiation of our identities via public discourses, however, we do not always adopt those which are most dominant. Wherever there are discourses promoting certain relations of power, there will, for Foucault, also be *resistant* discourses produced, which enable different kinds of subjects to be produced.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Think about a young person you know well.

What sort of discourses might have influenced the way that they are?

For example: Do you know a young man who thinks that he has to behave in a certain way in order to 'be a man'? What sort of language would he use about himself?

What are the 'discourses' that might have affected him?

The notion of discourse provides the means for interpreting the practices which structure people's understanding of themselves in relation to the world and suggests how subjectivity is constructed and negotiated by individuals. However, this subjectivity is *precarious*, contradictory and constantly in process, continually being reconstituted in discourse each time people think and speak. So, while this notion of discourse helps to explain the contradictions, shifts and changes, there appears to be no way of determining why or how some discourses are more powerful and

more marginal than others. It is here that Marxism does appear to help to explain why some discourses are more powerful than others. Althusser (1984) advances an idea of 'subjects' as constituted in and through ideology. An article by Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt (1993) contrasts the concept of discourse with the concept of ideology by suggesting that:

if 'discourse' and 'ideology' both figure in accounts of the general field of social action mediated through communicative practices, then 'discourse' focuses upon the internal features of those practices, in particular their linguistic and semiotic dimensions. On the other hand, 'ideology' directs attention towards the external aspects of focusing on the way in which lived experience is connected to notions of interest and position that are in principle distinguishable from lived experience.

(Purvis and Hunt, 1993, page 476)

Althusser (1984) had moved the concept of ideology from a crude and simplistic understanding of ideology as false consciousness or as a set of ideas which are imposed in a simplistic manner on the working classes by the bourgeois class to one which is much more complicated and contradictory. Ideology for Althusser was not a set of mistaken beliefs or lies: it represented a particular understanding of the world – a particular interpretation which legitimated a particular view of society. Ideology in Althusser's work represents a shift from a strict determination of the economic base to the notion that ideologies have an autonomy and are only determined in the *last instance* by economy relations. Althusser's (1984) concept of ideology helps us to understand how sets of ideas – for example, ideology of gender of masculinity and femininity – are linked to a system of power and control. However, despite the notion of autonomy, the concept still retains the notion that these ideas are imposed (even if that imposition is consensual rather than coercive) and that ideologies act on people rather than people acting on ideologies. The human subject is passive rather than active in this theoretical framework, and this means that it is difficult to explain shifts and changes in ideologies. How, for instance, can the notion of an ideology of masculinity explain many different masculinities rather than masculinity in the singular? The concept of discourse helps one to examine this plurality. It also provides a framework from which to trace historical changes in discourses.

Though there are a number of tensions in Foucault's work, what is offered here is the suggestion that his notion of discourse when linked with his concept of power can be used to elaborate the dilemmas and contradictions of the process of empowerment. Foucault's notion of power provides an escape from the notion that power is simply an imposition, a form of coercion, and allows the possibility of power being productive, collective and personal. The emphasis is on the practices of discourses that produced 'discursive regimes' of knowledge/power, or power in discourse. Posing the concept of discourse in this way allows one to ask, how does discourse serve, explain, assist in an understanding of – in this case – empowerment.

The linkage Foucault makes between discourse and power means that discourses have effects and implications for social processes as well as social practices. This

means that his ideas can be used to situate empowerment as relational to the constitution of the subject within a specifically local context.

ACTIVITY 1.4

It is useful to think about identity and subjectivity as part of how a person makes his or her way in the world. So, for example, some people have an identity shaped by their ethnicity, say, an Irish woman. This identity is shared with other women who are also Irish. However, each woman will bring her own subjectivity, her own sense of self, personality, experiences and so on, to bear on this identity. Thus, in this way, though there are discourses about women and about Irishness, each Irish woman will negotiate her way through these stories – thus negotiating with the discourses.

What is your identity? How is it similar, or different, from other people in your life? Can you see how your own self, personality, and personal experiences have influenced this identity?

Empowerment discourse

The concept of empowerment is used in these distinctive ways and is shaped by these ideological and theoretical disputes. The problem with using a 'simple', 'clear', 'useful' definition of empowerment is that the ideological underpinnings can be ignored and dismissed. There is not one approach or definition which can be used to cover up or mask these differences. Rather it is only through the process of critical reflective working that reveals at which level the activities, interactions or outcomes are operating.

ACTIVITY 1.5

What do you think that 'empowerment' is?

Do any of the following statements fit with your definition?

- *Empowerment is about encouraging deprived people to seize power in society.*
- *Empowerment is about individuals developing the skills to fit into society.*
- *Empowerment is important because every individual has a right to influence what happens in the world.*

Is your personal definition influenced by a particular political perspective? What are the ideological underpinnings? Would everybody agree with your definition?

Another difficulty is that, at times, it may be important (or the only available option) to operate at the level of a liberal approach to empowerment, for example, the basic level of allowing individuals a choice. Who determines the choice may not be an issue.

To achieve another outcome it may be essential to regard the power to set the agenda as a critical element in the process of empowerment. This would allow a wider range of individuals to become more involved in the workings of power, for example, they set the agenda rather than simply making a choice between set agendas.

It may be impossible or impractical for workers to operate at the level of structure.

Thus, there can be practical and pragmatic reasons why the type of empowerment on offer is curtailed or contained. There is another reason, however, why the process of empowerment can be stifled or restricted and this can be related to how the workers view their role.

The discourse of professionalism

The development of empowerment can create problems for workers depending on how attached they are to the notion of their role as professionals and how much power and control (expertise and knowledge) they invest in their role. The dilemma and tension may be that they acquire authority through their status as a professional yet they may have to lose this in the process of empowerment.

CASE STUDY

What is best?

Mark is employed by a community project with a good reputation. He is funded to support young people on work placements with a view to helping them find employment. His success will be measured by how many people manage to get jobs which last for at least three months.

Mark has a dilemma. His 'professional' head tells him to find out what sort of job opportunities are available locally and to offer training so that his work placements have the best chance of getting these jobs. He has a great deal of knowledge and experience, which will help him to do this successfully.

His 'youth worker' head is directing him towards finding out what the young people want, and how they want to use the placement opportunity. This means supporting them to develop their self-confidence and to work out what to do with their lives. To do this effectively, Mark has to let go of any feelings of 'knowing what is best' and of being an 'expert'.

At its worst it may mean that some workers may seek to modify the process so that they can maintain control, in effect, curtailing empowerment to the limits in which the worker feels comfortable. It may be that this is an unconscious rather than a

conscious act on their part. It may be that the worker is faced with the dilemma that in order to be seen to be 'working' he or she needs to demonstrate expertise and authority. It could also be that the worker is actively resisting the radical and revolutionary basis of empowerment as a way of protecting his or her status. The important point here is that different ideological positions will try to create their own version of the process of empowerment, and because these positions can only be analysed at the level of underlying theoretical positions, this is quite often perceived as an unnecessary over-complication of a simple process. The argument here, however, is that empowerment is not simple and a simple definition will not suffice, rather that analytical work needs to be ongoing in order for a model of empowerment to operate effectively in an organisation. The unclear ideological base, which can be part of the empowerment philosophy, is both a challenge and a danger for workers and for the process of empowerment.

One of the central contradictions in pursuing the goal of empowerment is the relationship between the individual and society. While all definitions are agreed on the ability of individuals to make decisions, control and guide their own lives, the extent to which this ability is constrained is less likely to be agreed by practitioners. An understanding of the structural constraints imposed on an individual again is dependent on the ideological stance of practitioners and how they see the relationship between structure and agency. One of the problems is that the ideological weight given to individualism and individual choice in consumer capitalism usually means that there is a blurring of the relationship between structure and agency among practitioners. Thus, the process of empowerment is viewed as working with people to increase their confidence, knowledge and skills. The structural constraints imposed by capitalist power relations, which can stop or hinder opportunities, are not addressed nor is the goal of empowerment, which has as its radical core the liberation for a collective rather than for an individual or a group. How are these dilemmas and contradictions to be resolved?

For Askheim (2003), the process of consciousness-raising as outlined in Freire (1993) can be used for groups

to overcome a purely individualistic analysis of their problems and to realise how social and structural factors affect or create their difficult life situation. In other words, the goals of such a process are to establish a comprehension among the users of the relationship between their personal situation and social structures.

(Askheim, 2003, page 233)

The necessary prerequisites for the process of empowerment is that the professional has to shift from the notion of 'expert' to work with individuals and groups in ways that enable them to actively reflect and analyse their experiences. For Askheim:

A relationship between the user and the professional characterised by collaboration, openness, respect and trust is therefore at the core for professional work within an empowerment tradition.

(Askheim, 2003, page 233)

For this writer and some others (see discussion in Askheim, 2003) this ability to communicate, even with groups who may not have verbal skills, is a fundamental part of the process. For another writer, Natorp (1920, 1922, cited in Askheim, 2003), these skills are not in themselves sufficient. Workers also need to be able to critically reflect on the theoretical basis for their practice. This reflection, however, has to be conducted with the user groups taking the leading role in developing theory and practice. So, professionals must be prepared to be constantly adapting to challenges by users to existing theories, and they also need to understand the relationship between structural constraints and individual needs and desires. If these dimensions are ignored then empowerment is reduced to a new therapeutic tool in the hands of the professionals (Askheim, 2003, page 235).

Thus, the ways in which workers interpret their role and their understanding of politics and state power are critical to the process. The process of empowerment is also dependent on the opportunity for workers to exercise this approach in an organisational setting. If the agency does not have the analytical framework which is needed for the work, then they are working within these limitations. To put these elements into another framework provided by Foucault, this is the notion of competing discourses, all of which will impact on the process of empowerment. One of these discourses has been discussed, that of the professional; others include the discourses of power and participation.

These varieties of discourses shape the available positions for subjects to take up and produce choices, though these may not be simple or conscious. Discourses do not stand alone; they can only be abstracted for the purpose of study and analysis but in practice there is a wide network of discursive fields that overlap and intermingle.

The problem of definition

This chapter ends as it began with the problem of definition. The preceding discussion has emphasised the need for an awareness of the theoretical underpinnings. Zimmerman (2000) suggests in his study that it is useful to differentiate between three levels of analysis: empowerment values, empowering processes and empowered outcomes. Lee Staples (1990) links process and outcomes by using the metaphor of an empowerment spiral (see figure 1.2).

Individuals when participating in groups acquire skills and resources, which strengthen the group's confidence in widening their goals and increasing their contribution to their local community.

Though I have resisted definitions, it might be useful to note some.

Wallerstein and Bernstein (1994, page 380) state:

Empowerment is a social action process that promotes participation of people, organisations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger society. With this perspective, empowerment is not

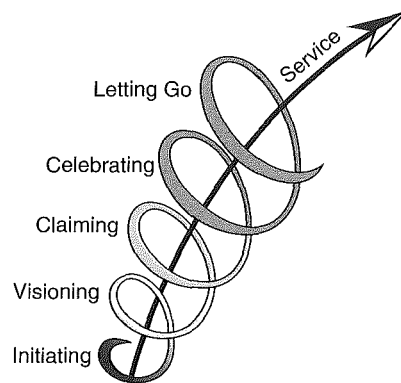


Figure 1.2 Empowerment spiral

Source: www.servalt.com/teamspirit/spiral.html

characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change.

(Wallerstein and Bernstein, 1994, page 380)

Parsloe, in her text entitled *Pathways to Empowerment*, writes:

No definitive definition of empowerment is offered here because the concept is still evolving and it means different things to different people... It may be seen as a way to reduce professional power or a ploy used cynically by professionals to protect their status and power. Its purpose may be to promote the personal growth of those empowered, to raise the quality and appropriateness of social services or to give the disadvantaged members of society some influence which may lead to their attaining greater political power.

(Parsloe, 1996, xvii on page 27)

Thompson (2007, page 21) states: *Empowerment can be defined as helping people gain greater control over their lives and circumstances. It is therefore closely linked to the notion of power.*

Rather than continue to list more definitions it may be useful to consider the notion of powerlessness. According to the text on *Surplus Powerlessness* by Michael Lerner:

When we feel powerless for any extended length of time, we tend to become more willing to accept parts of the world we would otherwise reject. We act in ways that go counter to our best visions of who we are and who we can and want to be.

Powerlessness corrupts.

Powerlessness corrupts in a very direct way: It changes, transforms, and distorts us. It makes us different from how we would otherwise want to be.

We look at our world and our own behaviour, and we tell ourselves that although we really aren't living the lives we want to live, there is nothing we can do about it. We are powerless.

(Lerner, 1988, page 2)

C H A P T E R R E V I E W

- Empowerment as a strategy for including people in decision making is interconnected with empowerment as an internal process for individuals.
- Empowerment is a process, rather than a theory or a concept.
- Power is a useful starting point and is a contested concept.
- Max Weber offers three sources of legitimacy for authority and power.
- Foucault's analysis of power includes a liberating and emancipatory perspective.
- Steven Lukes proposes three dimensions on analysing power in modern societies.
- The power elite are the military, political and economic spheres of society. This illustrates a distinction between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.
- Ideological underpinnings of definitions of empowerment should not be dismissed.
- Discourse of professionalism creates a dilemma for workers.
- Discourse analysis is a way of understanding the ways in which people live, think and speak.
- Empowerment can be seen in terms of values, processes and outcomes.

FURTHER READING

Lerner, M (1988) *Surplus Powerlessness: The Psychodynamics of Everyday Life and the Psychology of Individual and Social Transformation*. New York: Humanity Books.

Thompson, N (2007) *Power and Empowerment*. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.