In search of powerful empowerment

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A recent article in this journal ‘Has empowerment lost its power?’ by Woodall et al. [1] provides a critical perspective on the use of empowerment terminology in health promotion. The authors point out that although there has been substantive theoretical and empirical work on empowerment, the term has gained so much currency that it is now used in nearly every health promotion program description with ‘casual abandon’. Alongside this increasing popularity of empowerment as a term, the definition has seemingly become less precise. Usage of the term now often lacks connection with its originally intended focus on collective action, critical awareness, social justice and structural change. The authors conclude that the terminological dilution of empowerment has been at least partly caused by a greater scholarly and programmatic focus on the empowerment of individuals, rather than on community-level empowerment processes. They assert ‘individual empowerment alone has a limited impact on addressing health inequalities and may be illusory in that it does not lead to an increase in actual power or resources’ (p. 743). The authors link this increased focus on individual-level empowerment with the contemporary neoliberal policy environment, which has transferred risk from society to individuals while touting the importance of personal responsibility for outcomes, including health. They conclude with a call for more definitional clarity and precision in usage of the term, as well as more accurate measurement of empowerment at the individual and community levels.

Individual or psychological?

The authors equate individual empowerment and psychological empowerment. Yet, empowerment theorists have made a clear distinction between psychological empowerment and individual empowerment. Zimmerman [3] writes that an individually oriented conception of empowerment ‘neglects contextual considerations, is limited to a single paradigm, and treats empowerment as a personality variable’, while, in contrast, psychological empowerment ‘is a contextually oriented conception of empowerment’ (pp. 173–4) that is inseparable from empowerment theorized as a multilevel construct [4]. Many subsequent studies have built on this ecological theorization of psychological empowerment [5–7].

It is certainly true that there is a prevalent individualist bias in Western philosophy, social science,
policy and practice [8, 9]. It is also the case that more studies of empowerment, particularly in health-related fields, have used persons as the unit of analysis than other higher level units (e.g. organizations and communities). And, as the authors rightly point out, individualized notions of empowerment have proved compatible in some cases with a neoliberal paradigm and can be seen as less controversial than multilevel or community-level approaches. Yet, there is a need to distinguish between these individually oriented conceptions of empowerment and psychological empowerment, which has been explicitly theorized as inextricable from community and organizational empowerment processes.

**Multiple components of psychological empowerment**

Although tools for measuring psychological empowerment have been developed for different contexts, the most influential and frequently used conceptualization of the construct [14] includes not only self-perceptions of one’s ability to make change in the civic domain (an emotional component) but also a critical understanding of social power and community change processes (a cognitive component) [15]. This cognitive component of psychological empowerment is important for the realization of the goals of empowerment theory. It connects the measurement of psychological empowerment with the Freirian notion of critical consciousness [16] and is crucial for distinguishing between an optimistic sense or feeling that is sometimes confused with empowerment, and the psychological dynamics that are crucial parts of community and systems change processes. The cognitive component remains less frequently studied than the emotional component [17]. Greater focus on this and other components of psychological empowerment processes holds promise for moving the colloquial uses of the term closer to the social justice and liberation-focused intent of empowerment theory [9].

**Powerful empowerment is transactional**

A clear understanding of psychological empowerment as a multicomponent construct that is an inextricable part of a multilevel conceptualization of empowerment is a promising direction for addressing many of the critiques and abuses of ‘empowerment’. One possibility is that frustration with the co-optations, misuses and dilutions of the term could lead to a departure from all approaches to empowerment that involve psychological dynamics, in favor of those which focus exclusively on macro-level empowerment processes. These would likely prove to be as deficient as the excessively individually oriented approaches to which they
were a response. For example, looking back at decades-long trends in educational interventions, Dokecki et al. [18] describe a pendulum effect that had taken place between individual- and macro-level interventions. A preponderance of individualistic interventions would lead to calls for more macro-level interventions, until those models became dominant. Eventually, the pendulum would swing back in the other direction. They observed that ‘exclusive positions, either social system or individual oriented, may end up looking similar, structurally at least, and perhaps are similarly incomplete and unable to handle complex social problems’ (p. 183).

Is there an alternative to this micro-macro pendulum effect? Along with others, I assert that multi-level approaches focused on the patterns of transactions between systems and inhabitants are the most promising alternative [19, 20]. I am therefore in agreement with Woodall et al. [1] on the importance of increasing the prevalence of practical efforts and studies that promote and assess empowerment across multiple levels of analysis. Yet, I would hasten to add that these levels of analysis should include not only the psychological (not individual) and community levels but that they should also include the organizational level. Research in community psychology has identified organizational empowerment processes as key setting-level mediators between psychological and community-level empowerment [21]. Rather than seeking to promote empowerment through interventions at the level of psychology, or at the level of communities, the level of the organization/setting is often the most effective point of intervention [22]. More research that assesses the transactions between empowerment processes at different levels of analysis [23] is badly needed.

Empowerment theory provides a useful orientation for health promotion that encourages the proliferation of settings in which marginalized or oppressed people and groups can gain more power and greater control over their lives [24, 25]. This should, of course, continue to be a central goal for health promotion, community development and related areas of praxis. Research and evaluation of empowering processes should also be a priority. Hence, the question is one of terminology—has the term empowerment in fact been so abused and co-opted that it needs to be discarded in favor of a new term? Or, can its intent be revived through efforts to reconnect the term to its historical roots and orientation toward collective action for social justice? Woodall et al.’s [1] initiative in beginning a new discussion on this topic presents an opportunity for such reconnection. Similar questions are being raised in related fields. For instance, referring to empowerment and other buzzwords in a recent article in Community Development Journal, Toomey [26] asserts that it is vital that ‘scholars and critics make a continual effort to take these words apart to put them back together again’ (p. 183). In a trend converse to that of health promotion, scholarship on community development has paid greater attention to empowerment at the community level, and can likewise, I believe, advance its goals through a more ecological approach that includes psychological empowerment [27].

Summary and conclusion

My critique of the current discourse on empowerment is similar to Woodall et al.’s [1], yet our recommendations for action based on this diagnosis differ. Specifically, while I agree that the prevalence of individualistic notions of empowerment are related to the ascendant neoliberal ideology and are responsible for much of empowerment’s terminological dilution, I would nevertheless caution scholars and practitioners against neglecting any level of analysis, including the psychological level. Instead, I urge increased familiarity with psychological empowerment, which has been conceptualized ecologically as a multilevel construct [3, 4] that is inextricable from organizational and community-level empowerment. Likewise, it is important to adjust practices and research programs in accordance with this multilevel framing [28]. Further, I recommend greater attention to psychological empowerment as a multi-component construct [9, 14]. More widespread understanding of
the cognitive component [15, 17] holds particular promise for reconnecting the current empowerment discourse with its social justice and social action origins [24].

Finally, I propose that empowerment processes and outcomes at the organization and setting level [21, 23] hold particular promise for future research and practice. Identifying features of organizations and settings that can most effectively build social power and promote empowerment is a key for encouraging community-level changes, which occur in dynamic transaction with psychological change processes. This point-of-view article is intended to help keep these important transdisciplinary conversations going, in hopes that they will bring a more widespread critical focus on what precisely is meant by the term ‘empowerment’. The term itself could then have greater power to achieve its goals.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

References