

**Empowerment:  
Self in Community**

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Personal empowerment is often seen as separate from community empowerment. Furthermore, personal empowerment may emphasize "personal control" to the exclusion of other elements, such as community. Much of my work in the last decade has considered the context of personal empowerment within community.

During several years of working, advocating, and researching with vulnerable citizens (mental health consumer/survivors, self-advocates with developmental disabilities, and people with physical disabilities), I noticed that although many vulnerable citizens seemed to feel powerless, a number were in fact quite empowered. These individuals often had a degree of personal control and were involved with strong social networks. My sense was that people had a strong sense of self within a collective milieu. I wondered what the process and catalysts might have been for the changes these citizens had experienced. In a series of research studies, I began to research this question with colleagues.

In this paper, I shall briefly highlight the main results of those research studies, and present the qualitative themes and the empowerment process which we identified. I shall note that empowerment is about "self in community." For all our research participants, empowerment occurred in the context of relationships. I shall also briefly describe more recent experiences I have had working with mental health consumer/ survivors as researchers in a mental health change study which confirm for me that *empowerment is usually embedded in community*.

### **The Approach to the Studies**

Forty-one men and women who had experienced extensive powerlessness in their lives were selected as the research participants. Most people had been quite vulnerable for long periods, but over time had gained more control and increased their participation. Using qualitative interviews, this series of studies was designed to understand participants' lived experience "from their own point of view," as they struggled to reduce personal powerlessness and dependency (Lord & Farlow, 1990; Lord, 1991; Lord & Hutchison, 1993).

Our qualitative approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lord, Schnarr, & Hutchison, 1987; Patton, 1990) provided an in-depth examination of the process of people's transition toward increased control and participation in their lives. The research team used four main approaches to study the process of personal empowerment: an extensive literature review; interviews with a number of key informants; in-depth biographical interviews with people who had experienced extensive powerlessness in their lives; and focused group interviews in order to gain further reflections on the initial findings from the biographical interviews (de Boer, 1992; Lord, 1991).

### **Themes on the Empowerment Process**

The table on the next page captures the empowerment process as reflected by the experience of our research participants. The stages, which are certainly not linear and evolve quite distinctively for each person, illustrate the importance of context and relationships as people increase their sense of empowerment.

**Powerlessness.** The research participants described in great detail the anguish of feeling powerless. No single factor or experience created a sense of powerlessness; rather, it was a build-up of factors and experiences that developed into a dis-empowering situation. The data showed that all four research groups experienced extended periods of powerlessness in their lives as a result of social isolation, unresponsive services and systems, poverty, and abuse. For most of the people with disabilities, for example, their social isolation began early in life. As Foucault (1984) has pointed out, many groups in western culture are "maneuvered by myths" (p.8); one of the cruelest myths experienced by people with disabilities is that they do not have the same social needs as other citizens. Most participants at this stage had very small, uninvolved social networks, which accentuated their conditions of oppression. I have argued elsewhere that using the language of empowerment without really uncovering and naming the issues of power and oppression can limit our analysis and our actions (Lord & Dufort., 1996).

**Awareness - impetus to empowerment.** The transition towards personal empowerment was a uniquely individual and ongoing process. Charting the process required that attention be paid to each person's story, as well as to common themes across all participants. For most of the participants, their impetus to empowerment was not a conscious decision. Instead, it was motivated by some concrete factors that participants, in reflecting back, were able to identify. These factors or situations acted like catalysts for the empowerment process and led to two vital changes in participants. Individuals became aware of their own capacities and of alternatives to the experience of powerlessness. Second, individuals began to develop new directions for themselves. The main factors were:

- being involved in a crisis or "life transition."
- acting on anger or frustration.
- responding to new information or new context.

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**Table 1**  
**Elements of the Personal Empowerment Process\***

Experiencing Powerlessness	Gaining Awareness	Learning New Roles	Initiating Participating	Contributing
• social isolation	• acting on anger	• connecting with others	• joining groups	• being a role model
• service dependency	• responding to information	• linking with resources	• speaking out	• having influence
• limited choices	• responding to new contexts	• expanding choices/ opportunities	• expanding participatory competence	• increasing self-efficacy

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\* from Lord, J. (1991). *Lives in transition: The process of personal empowerment..* Kitchener: Centre for Research & Education in Human Services and Ottawa: Disabled Person's Participation Program, Secretary of State.

- building on inherent strengths and capabilities.

For each of these factors, relationships with others were critical.

**Learning and connecting - developing support relationships.** Personal supports were vital in expanding personal empowerment. For most participants, support provided by others was most useful when they had already started to become aware of alternatives. Every one of the research participants identified at least one significant person as being important to his or her personal empowerment. Three main types of support relationship were identified as being particularly significant. Practical support was identified as practical, tangible help that enabled people to solve problems. It seemed clear from some of the participants that many of their lives were so troubling and so lacking resources that this kind of practical help was often one of the first steps toward the person regaining a sense of control and involvement in their own life. Many participants found a person who provided important moral support. An ability to listen was the quality that was most often identified as the basis of moral support. This type of support seemed to provide people with an opportunity to confirm their own intuition, increase their belief in themselves, and recognize their own strengths and potential capacities. Many people also described a person in their lives who they perceived as a significant role model or mentor. For the most part, participants identified mentors who were of the same sex and who had been through similar experiences to themselves. Connecting with a support relationship seems to be key in part because, as research and analysis has suggested, "people building on other people's strengths" is one of the key ways to facilitate personal empowerment (Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1988; Rapp, 1993; Rappaport, 1987).

**Access to Valued Resources.** An important aspect of the empowerment process was having access to valued resources. When they experienced powerlessness, most of the participants had access only to resources which they perceived as being different or specifically for "rehabilitation" or "welfare." Beginning to have access to the same valued resources and opportunities as other community members was important for people's empowerment process. For some participants, gaining employment was a pivotal point in their lives as a way of expanding their economic power. Other examples of valued resources included housing, technical resources such as a motorized wheelchair, and money. Most people were critical of the resource of services and service systems, particularly systems which were bureaucratic, congregating, and controlling. It is significant to

note that the health and social service workers who were seen as helpful were characterized as "a good listener", "an equal", "a guide", and a person "who really cares". Other research has shown that the language and discourse of the helping professional can contribute to empowerment (Paul, Lambert, St-Cyr Tribble, 1995). Again, it is the relationship that is central to the process.

**Participation.** Participation significantly advanced the process of empowerment for all of the people involved in the research. In fact, the process of participation itself was empowering. As people gained in self-confidence, they would seek more avenues for participation; their involvement in community activity would in turn enhance their self-confidence and sense of personal control. The experience of participants showed that participation contributed to personal empowerment in three ways. As participants became engaged in an activity, social group, or social action, they often noted the value of the social interaction and a reduction of their social isolation. Several participants talked about their experience of being invited and welcomed as being an important first step of community participation. Initial participation was usually based on personal interest which they shared with others. Furthermore, participation in community activities and associations enabled people to try new things and expand their participatory competence. Many participants talked about the importance of community participation for developing their skills. Several people gave examples of how having success in one aspect of their lives encouraged them to try other things. As people sustained their involvement, they deepened their competence and control. It is in this manner that participation advanced the process of personal empowerment (Keiffer, 1984).

Regardless of the nature of their participation, being part of a group and/or making a contribution to the community was important for all the participants at some point in their journey. It seems that the collective experience affords a level of trust and comfort with others and a vehicle for asserting oneself (Watt and Rodmell, 1988). Involvement was based on the person's capacity at that time and his or her commitment to the group's goals. While the types of groups and organizations varied widely, the important point was that people became more socially active over time.

## Reflections and Paradoxes

In her classic book, *Powers of the Weak* (1980), Elizabeth Janeway argues that vulnerable people have a kind of power that is both personal and collective. In a similar vein, some feminists have re-conceptualized power, so that it is no longer based on individualism and "power over" (bell hooks, 1984; Starhawk, 1987). Rather, "power with" is seen as a viable alternative that includes the sharing of power, with each person's voice being respected, and with an emphasis on "self in community." It is in this sense that my research speaks to the concept of empowerment.

It is important for those interested in empowerment and vulnerable citizens to continually reflect on the meaning of power (Church, 1995). The sense I have of people embracing "power with" through their actions relates to the experience of vulnerability. The people who were part of these studies knew that they were still vulnerable even though their lives were much better off than they had been previously. Gaining "power over" others was simply not part of their experience or discourse. And yet so much discussion in our world is about legitimate power, which may have little to do with empowerment.

Most of the literature associates empowerment with personal control (Rappaport, 1987). The people interviewed in this study echoed this concern for control as they described their struggles. Other literature describes control in terms of coping (Epp, 1986; World Health Organization, 1987). This research data strongly suggests that personal control is more than just coping. In fact, people who achieved the greatest degree of control in their lives, were those who refused to accept their situation and instead kept questioning and searching for options. People had dreams and acted on them. In terms of empowerment, then, personal control can be seen as an active process of engagement in the social world. As discussed elsewhere, this insight has important implications for community health professionals (Lord & McKillop Farlow, 1990).

I like to describe personal control within a social world as a paradox mostly aptly expressed as "self in community." This clearly places

empowerment in a context. Arai (1997) has extended my work by proposing key roles for supporters at each of the stages. Support persons working from an empowerment framework do things differently. Building on strengths, providing information, or linking people with community resources are conscious attempts to expand confidence, control and participation. Being aware of the power of the vulnerable person, and sometimes consciously reigning in one's own power, is a paradox for those who say they want to facilitate the empowerment of others. Similarly, the knowledge that "community matters" in the empowerment process is a challenge to those who see control as the central issue. These dilemmas require "reflective practitioners."

Even as I write these words I sense there is something more here. It is more as if empowerment is a relationship. Remember the professionals who were valued by our vulnerable participants - "people who listened", "people who related to me as an equal." Remember the power of community settings where individuals were accepted and supported. Developing empowering relationships that are embedded in community is very difficult work. For those of us who are professionals, it requires that we deconstruct our own power and presence. I have found that vulnerable people relate to me when I accept them *and* when I share who I am and what I believe. Isn't this the beginning of dialogue and the beginning of relationship!

Several recent experiences have confirmed for me the usefulness of "self in community." I am currently working on a study where consumer/survivors have been hired as researchers. One of the researchers has noted to me that this involvement has contributed to his own empowerment, in part because of the "atmosphere of equality" that exists within the entire project. My experience is that such an atmosphere, or sense of community, only happens after people have built relationships. And this is a demanding process of dialogue, challenge, disagreements, and reflections. In such settings, vulnerable citizens have a "voice" and full participation, while professionals share feelings and collaborate fully. These words may at first not fit the experience of professionals because they do not describe what we typically experience in settings with vulnerable citizens.

## Summary of Themes and Issues

The concept of empowerment has diverse meanings. While our studies have focused on the process of empowerment, there are some important insights from this work that can contribute to clarifying the concept and meaning of empowerment. Without careful attention being paid to the concept and its meanings, there is a danger of a "technique trap," whereby the concept is practiced without understanding. The fact that "empowerment" is currently used in so many inappropriate situations reflects this fear.

- this study confirms the importance of describing empowerment in ecological terms.
- empowerment process can be described by "stages" which are non-linear and inter-related.
- personal control is more than just coping; rather, personal control can be seen as an active process of engagement in the social world.
- "self in community" as a concept may be a valuable way to think about the context of empowerment, thus emphasizing the importance of relationships in the process of change.
- empowerment of vulnerable citizens may require professionals to dramatically change their strategies and their selves.

Finally, I think we need further reflection on "self in community", which has at least two important meanings. Vulnerable citizens benefit from the dialogue and respect that is part of "sense of community", and from participation in "community as place," quite distinct from the professional world of "helping." Do we need to accept the paradox that, while "control" is important to vulnerable people, empowerment occurs within community and is connected to relationships?

In this work, I always find myself going "back and forth" between the issues facing individuals and communities, and current cultural values and dilemmas. In our culture, for example, the threads of community feel very strained. How do we emphasize "empowerment in community" in a culture which emphasizes individualism, technology and efficiency? How do we facilitate and support vulnerable people to have more power and valued community resources when so much of people's lives is controlled by "professional helping" and poverty? Rather than seeing this as a depressing ending to this paper, I think the final reflections place empowerment in a cultural context which demands that there be multiple strategies to affect the kind of social change which would enable vulnerable citizens to live and participate in our communities with dignity.

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