Research Paper   **Social Science**

Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

For many in Extension, empowerment is the goal we have for our programs and the volunteers, participants, or clients with whom we work. But what is empowerment? How can we recognize it? Evaluate it? Talk about it with others who are interested in empowerment? Empowerment is a process that challenges our assumptions about the way things are and can be. It challenges our basic assumptions about power, helping, achieving, and succeeding. To begin to demystify the concept of empowerment, we need to understand the concept broadly in order to be clear about how and why we narrow our focus of empowerment for specific programs and projects and to allow discussion of empowerment across disciplinary and practice lines. Understanding empowerment became a critical issue for us as we grappled with the task of sharing the People Empowering People (PEP) program with Extension faculty across the country.

Keywords : Empowerment, PEP, Individual, Community

Understanding Power

At the core of the concept of empowerment is the idea of power. The possibility of empowerment depends on two things. First, empowerment requires that power can change. If power cannot change, if it is inherent in positions or people, then empowerment is not possible, nor is empowerment conceivable in any meaningful way. In other words, if power can change, then empowerment is possible. Second, the concept of empowerment depends upon the idea that power can expand. This second point reflects our common experiences of power rather than how we think about power. To clarify these points, we first discuss what we mean by power.

Power is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests (Weber, 1946). Traditional social science emphasizes power as influence and control, often treating power as a commodity or structure divorced from human action (Lips, 1991). Conceived in this way, power can be viewed as unchanging or unchangeable. Weber (1946) gives us a key word beyond this limitation by recognizing that power exists within the context of a relationship between people or things. Power does not exist in isolation nor is it inherent in individuals. By implication, since power is created in relationships, power and power relationships can change. Empowerment as a process of change, then, becomes a meaningful concept.

A brief exercise makes the importance of this discussion clear. Quickly, list three words that immediately come to mind when you hear the word power. For most people, words that come to mind when we think about power often revolve around control and domination. Focusing on these aspects of power limit our ability to understand and define empowerment.

The concept of empowerment also depends upon power that can expand our second stated requirement. Understanding power as zero-sum, as something that you get at my expense, cuts most of us off from power. A zero-sum conception of power means that power will remain in the

hands of the powerful unless they give it up. Although this is certainly one way that power can be experienced, it neglects the way power will remain in the hands of the powerful unless they give it up. Although this is certainly one way that power is experienced, it neglects the way power is experienced in most interactions. Another brief exercise highlights the importance of a definition of power that includes expansion. Answer the question; "Have you ever felt powerful?" Was it at someone's expense? Was it with someone else?

Grounded in an understanding that power will be seen and understood differently by people who inhabit various positions in power structures (Lukes, 1994), contemporary research on power has opened new perspectives that reflect aspects of power that are not zero-sum, but are shared. Feminists (Miller, 1976; Starhawk, 1987), members of grassroots organizations (Bookman & Morgen, 1984), racial and ethnic groups (Nicola-McLaughlin & Chandler, 1984), and even individuals in families bring into focus another aspect of power, one that is characterized by collaboration, sharing and mutuality (Kreisberg, 1992).

Researchers and practitioners call this aspect of power "relational power"(Lappe & DuBois, 1994), generative power (Korten, 1987), "integrative power," and "power with" (Kreisberg, 1992).This aspect means that gaining power actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it such as occurs with domination/power. Kreisberg has suggested that power defined as "the capacity to implement" (Kreisberg, 1992:57) is broad enough to allow power to mean domination, authority, influence, and shared power or "power with." It is this definition of power, as a process that occurs in relationships, that gives us the possibility of empowerment.

Understanding Empowerment

Empowerment is a construct shared by many disciplines and arenas: community development, psychology, education, economics, and studies of social movements and organizations, among others. How empowerment is understood varies among these perspectives

In recent empowerment literature, the meaning of the term empowerment is often assumed rather than explained or defined. Rappoport (1984) has noted that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define in action as it takes on different forms in different people and contexts. Even defining the concept is subject to debate. Zimmerman (1984) has stated that asserting a single definition of empowerment may make attempts to achieve it formulaic or prescription-like, contradicting the very concept of empowerment.

A common understanding of empowerment is necessary, however, to allow us to know empowerment when we see it in people with whom we are working, and for program evaluation. According to Bailey (1992), how we precisely define empowerment within our projects and programs will depend upon the specific people and context involved.

As a general definition, however, we suggest that empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important.

We suggest that three components of our definition are basic to any understanding of empowerment. Empowerment is multi-dimensional, social, and a process. It is multi-dimensional in that it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, and other dimensions. Empowerment also occurs at various levels, such as individual, group, and community. Empowerment, by definition, is a social process, since it occurs in relationship to others. Empowerment is a process that is similar to a path or journey, one that develops as we work through it. Other aspects of empowerment may vary according to the specific context and people involved, but these remain constant. In addition, one important implication of this definition of empowerment is that the individual and community are fundamentally connected.

Interconnection of Individuals and Community

Wilson (1996) pointed out that recently, more researchers, organizers, politicians and employers recognize that individual change is a prerequisite for community and social change and empowerment (Speer & Hughey, 1995; Florin and Wandersman, 1990; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). This does not mean that we can point the finger at those with less access to power, telling them that they must change to become more like "us" in order to be powerful/successful. Rather, individual change becomes a bridge to community connectedness and social change (Wilson, 1996).

To create change we must change individually to enable us to become partners in solving the complex issues facing us. In collaborations based on mutual respect, diverse perspectives, and a developing vision, people work toward creative and realistic solutions. This synthesis of individual and collective change (Wilson, 1996; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Speer & Hughey, 1995) is our understanding of an empowerment process. We see this inclusive individual and collective understanding of empowerment as crucial in programs with empowerment as a goal. It is in the critical transition, or interconnection, between the individual and the communal, or social, that programs such as ours, People Empowering People, can be invaluable for people and communities.

Empowerment and PEP

The People Empowering People (PEP) program uses the definition of empowerment to connect research, theory, and practice. The Connecticut PEP program builds on theory of critical adult education developed by Friere (1970), Horton (1989), and others. PEP focuses on the strengths of people, providing opportunities and resources for people to gain experiences and skills while they also gain control over their lives.

Underlying this process is mutual respect between participants, facilitators, advisory committee members, and others involved in the program. PEP opens to participants the recognition of their own values and beliefs, and encourages expression of their own issues as they define them. The focus is on the connection between individual action and community action, encouraging individual change through training sessions and discussions, and supporting community action through participants' efforts to change their communities. While we cannot give people power and we cannot make them "empowered," we can provide the opportunities, resources and support that they need to become involved themselves.

In conclusion, we see empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society by acting on issues that they define as important. In PEP as in Extension we strive to teach people skills and knowledge that will motivate them to take steps to improve their own lives -- to be empowered.

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