EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE PLACE FOR NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

James Herrick, D.S.W.
November 1995

Please address correspondence to James Herrick, University of Washington, School of Social Work, 4101 15th Ave. NE., Seattle WA 98195. (Telephone: 206-543-6072 Fax: 206-543-1228; e-mail: jamesher@u.washington.edu)

THE PROBLEM

In this paper we critically examine current empowerment theory and its relationship to social change, and set forth ideas for social transformation drawing on new social movement theories. The historical and current conception of empowerment practice focuses primarily on individual enlightenment and emancipation in a way that is not directly relevant to collective action and social transformation (Fay, 1987; Heller, 1990; Breton, 1994). Margot Breton's recent review of the literature of empowerment practice and subsequent analysis reflects the essence of the problem: "Even though one has experienced empowering cognitive and behavioral changes, it is difficult to argue that one is empowered as long as those personal and interpersonal changes have no impact on socially unjust situations which affect one's life" (Breton, 1994, p. 31). Also, as Breton notes, drawing on the work of Swift and Levin (1987), while empowerment connotes both a subjective and objective reality, they are related but different phenomena. As she points out "The objective reality of empowerment refers to the structural conditions which affect the allocations of power in a society and give access to its resources" (Breton, 1994, p. 29). Breton argues that the subjective reality of changes in perception/consciousness/enlightenment, while important, is different from objective results/outcome, e.g., impact on social conditions. Such social action in empowerment practice is a move beyond the focus on the individual but as Breton aptly notes, may not move beyond consideration of entitlement:

The awareness and the exercise of the right to access resources is a necessary condition for empowerment but is not a sufficient one. We would argue that the conscientization process which leads to empowerment includes the awareness not only of the right to access existing resources, but of the right and responsibility to participate in creating resources, and eliminating inappropriate or ineffective resources" (Breton, 1994, p. 29).

Such consideration of responsibility for social changes is essential to all progressive social workers, and is consistent with the literature on planned social change (Fabrican & Burghardt, 1992; Kendall & Max, 1991; Mizrahi & Morrison, 1993; Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 1993; Rubin & Rubin, 1992). However, the literature on empowerment theory and practice is relatively mute on this point and does not draw from the literature and practice of planned social change to provide such a focus. Breton in her recent article (1994) makes an attempt, stating:

... the process of conscientization (developing an awareness of personal and structural dimensions of situations or problems) becomes part of an empowering strategy only if the cognitive restructuring it entails leads to seizing or creating opportunities in the environment to either change the structural dimensions which constitute obstacles or to take advantage of the structural dimensions which constitute resources, and only if these exist the capacities and the will or motivation to seize the opportunities" (pp. 32-33).

Such consideration means that "the power to name must be accompanied by the power to act" (Breton, 1994, p. 36).

Using a simple dictionary definition, power means being influential, having control, being effective (American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 1072). Such influence, control, effectiveness involves the consideration of authority: an accepted source of expert information, a conclusive statement or decision that may be taken as a guide or precedent, power to influence or persuade resulting from knowledge or experience (American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 92). Authority can take three forms: 1) regulatory, based on one's formal position and status in relation to others (employer-employees, teacher-student, police officer-citizen); 2) expert knowledge, where the expert may possess the power to define ordinary people or to withhold knowledge from those whose well-being is affected by it. Vast bodies of technical regulations exist whose application becomes the responsibility of the political technician; and 3) relationship ability or interpersonal skills, where power comes from interpersonal influence based on abilities to work with people. Obviously one may have one kind of power and authority and not others or may have all three in various degrees.

The meaning of power in empowerment practice also needs to be clarified in terms of power relations. First, the ability to exercise power, through use of one or more of the three kinds of authority, is not the same as exercising it. In this instance we call such power latent (available but not used). Second, the exercise of power takes place in social relations. These social relations pertain to the objective reality of empowerment--the structural conditions that affect the allocation of power; seizing or creating opportunities in the environment; changing structural conditions (Breton, 1994). Third, power relations can be symmetrical or asymmetrical (Heller, 1984). Relations of symmetry are those where relatively equal amounts and type of power and authority are exercised and are based on reciprocity (mutual influence). Relations of asymmetry are those involving unequal amounts and types of power and authority, and are those of subordination and superordination. It is the later case, power relations of asymmetry, that we suggest is the major stage for empowerment practice.

From a perspective of empowerment focusing primarily on individual enlightenment and emancipation, one would say that every person ought to develop their own abilities and needs, and be "empowered" to do so. Yet in a society based on relations of subordination and superordination, as Heller (1984, p. 185) notes, "Every person cannot develop their own abilities and needs that involve these abilities, because the society is one of a quasi-natural division of labor and of social inequality." This society produces personalities with one-sided developed abilities, personalities which are the result of peoples' places stratified by class, race, gender, and culture, and the role expectations that go with them. Such a situation, if accepted as a necessary limiting condition for empowerment practice, means empowerment within the context of the prevailing social order. We believe that focusing on individual enlightenment and emancipation in current empowerment theory and practice can only have that effect, thus may not facilitate the development of alternative social conditions.

RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM

Fundamental to empowerment practice focused on social change is the creation of social relations of symmetry within and through which power relations are established and used for the purposes of creating alternatives-"what ought to be"--and changing "what is." Social relations of symmetry can come from relational individualism--the social matrix out of which human individuality emerges.

Given relations of symmetry, people can collectively explore the real commitments that define their lives as human beings, and create a vision of self actualization in their social environment: a new way of expressing what our world is, who we are, and what we ought to be. Toward emancipation from what exists, such a vision needs to be based on moral ideals. Progressive social workers need to be motivated by a sense of vocation or "calling," rather

than "job," directed toward meanings and purposes beyond the immediate satisfactions and dissatisfactions, the immediate achievements and frustrations of the moment.

Based on social relations of symmetry and shared values, such a vocation is a willing alliance of the relational self with meanings and tasks which are larger than the self. Vocation is discovered at the intersection of one's growing moral commitments, new powers achieved through the relational self, and the needs and possibilities of the world.

Out of people working with one another comes a growing awareness of previously unrecognized needs, accompanied by conflicts around related rights and responsibilities. Critical to this work is the acceptance of conflict as a necessary stage leading to dialogue and new considerations. Useful dialogue must necessarily relegate people's quantitative needs as secondary to the overriding objective of development of the social unit as whole.

In considering new ways to meet conflicting needs, perception, cognition, and action must function reciprocally, on a continuum. New perceptions lead to new understanding, new understanding leads to new behavior, new behavior leads to new perception. In this formulation the power to name (perception-cognition) includes the power to act (behavior), and vice versa.

In order for empowerment practice to broaden its focus on individual enlightenment and emancipation to be relevant to collective action and social transformation, new structural arrangements may be called for. Existing structural mechanisms that are resistant to creative change must be recreated.

First, a reconsideration of the meaning of agency is called for. From collective action perspective, agency can be defined as a means of community problem solving to help identify and meet the needs of people as they so define them. Agency as means rather than as end is a structural arrangement established at a particular point in time for purposes that transcend and are thus apart from the mechanism itself. In this sense, agency may be a physical site or it may be other means of a non-physical nature, such as planning arrangements or strategies for change in our formulation of community-based empowerment practice focused on social change. Consequently the structure itself, such as agency (means,) is not the primary source of legitimization, sanction, and accountability as it might be in existing agencies.

Such structural considerations are necessary so that community based practice for social change can be implemented. Our experience leads us to believe that new structures relevant to our objectives must normally be created as existing ones are usually counterproductive and highly resistant to change. Examples of such new structures or agencies for community based empowerment practice follow.

EDUCATIONAL LEARNING UNITS

Drawing on Shor's (1992) discussion of empowering education, practitioners of conventional modes of teaching/learning need to be desocialized from asymmetrical and individualistic modes of social relations to learn symmetrical relations of connectedness and equality with others. Concurrent with this learning is the use of a language for such communication, and experience with it in a relatively safe setting where necessary corrections can be made. Such a learning unit may be attached to larger educational units in a school of social work, or if unworkable, separately under other community-based auspices.

DEMONSTRATION PRACTICE PROJECTS

As an extension of such learning units or in conjunction with them, demonstration projects could be used to test approaches to practice, evaluate progress, and provide a research base for further work. Use of participatory action research approaches would be congruent with

the framework of community based empowerment practice for social change as outlined here. Coordination of action throughout a variety of projects and sharing of results could lead to necessary refinement, change, and expansion of effort.

Success in these endeavors is not likely to occur without considerable resistance from those who have fundamentally different objectives. While such resistance could be viewed as differences conducive to dialogue, we think not. Consideration of dialogue assumes a willingness to consider new alternatives and thus an openness to change. In fact, what is likely is several modes of social reality that are very different from one another. For people to stay with a new alternative in the face of adversity will require consideration and development of rewards different from the old and more significant for meeting needs. Consequently new institutional arrangements/structures will have to be created as progress necessitates them.

While the forecasting of such arrangements on a specific level is premature, they certainly will mean change of the current asymmetrical reward system that reifies competition for allegedly scarce resources, ranking, access to positions of power. For example, the criteria for "making it" as a progressive social work practitioner and/or educator would be considerably different in relations of symmetry.

NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The work of Fisher and Kling (1994) on new social movement theory provides ideas for creating relations of symmetry across space and time, for dialogue around differences, and collective work for change. The electronic revolution, while it may benefit some more than others, also offers a new mechanism for such dialogue. As Fisher and Kling note, the concept of community in the modern world is no longer geographically place bound but transcends across space and time to encompass networks of groups that share common interests. Through computer technology, these networks have the capacity for instantaneous two way interactive communication that includes print, voice, and visual connections. Such technology provides the opportunity for diverse transclass groupings of constituencies and cultural identities to interact in nonhierarchical modes of communication.

Furthermore, the collapse of the experience of political and cultural centrality that yields a more fragmented political and cultural terrain (Fisher & Kling, 1994) can be seized upon as an opportunity for significant change in the foundation for connection between people. Social movement theory supported by available technology for communication can lead to relational communities. The monopoly of formal knowledge by elites can be broken by such use of communication in the hands and control of ordinary people and through internet networks that are grassroots relational community oriented. Clearly if, as Fisher and Kling state, the modem day sites of struggle and conflict are not workplace and local in origin but across space to relational communities, the need is for relational community modes of communication such as computers. Already, a number of community groups, unions, minorities, and other disenfranchised segments of society are using computers, video, cable, and other tools in creative and empowering ways (see Community Careers Resource Center, 1985; Heaney, 1982). Use of the concept of relational community rather than geographic community allows community change effort to focus on the complex relationality that shapes our social and political lives and to define the world in relational terms.

New social movement theory coupled with use of interactive computer technology offers an alternative to the use of only two social analytic perspectives in discussion of social movement practice: 1) the deterministic influence of objective structural relationships in society (functionalism and structuralism) on one hand and 2) the primacy of individual subjective societal interpretation (phenomenology and much of existential theory) on the other. Theories that focus on the structures that determine social outcome (Parsonian functionalism and Althusserian Marxism) fail to consider the individual as active,

knowledgeable, and reflexively contemplative. Agent-oriented theories, on the other hand, treat structures as mere background to which action is negotiated and its meaning formed. Furthermore, these theories marginalize the importance of power relations and societal conflicts in focusing almost exclusively upon the nature of reason or intention in human activity (see Fay, 1987 for a discussion on the limits to rationality). This individual-society distinction by theorists assumes that while agency can construct a wide range of rules and resources that help to structure diverse everyday action, the power of pregiven structural imperatives embedded within the social system defines the limits for this human construction. The limits to human constructiveness are set by powerful preconfigured forces in a dominant social system in terms of class, race, and gender that are persistent and defy human restructuring.

The alternative social analytic perspective offered by new social movement theory challenges these assumptions about the power and constraints of capitalist imperatives alleged to be embedded within the social system. The alternative assumption is that the social system under capitalism can and is being reconfigured through new modes of interaction across space. Enhanced by communications technology, the reconfiguration can take place through the social and power relations of symmetry, engendering a new kind of social system that transcends the older place bound structures operating in the context of capitalism. The most important point here is that those of us interested in new social movement theory need to reconsider the assumption of the deterministic nature of capitalist structural imperatives as these structures are made and continued by people in interaction with one another and are not an entity disconnected from human influence and control.

Finally, understanding new social movements in terms of implications for social action requires visualization as well as thought. Such visualization means to see it taking place and to see its impact upon people. This can happen through demonstration projects carried out in practice, and communication about these projects through interactive electronic technology. One of the outcomes of this conference could be planning for such projects.