



Empowerment – a relational challenge

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Abstract

Empowerment promotion is a major challenge for community psychology. Practitioners' understanding of change processes and relationship building capacity are crucial elements for this.

We reflect on some methodological and theoretical frames. We consider that the naturalistic paradigm and method can be applied to empowerment promotion, particularly if it is focused on creating change based on people's voice, participation and actions (Aguiar & Moniz, 2006). Besides, it helps to understand elements, boundaries and timings of change process. So, it can be a very useful method for action research.

We believe that empowerment promotion is a relational challenge and that community development paths are based on relationship building, from the group to the community levels. It is a major challenge to promote empowerment, because to listen to voices of people, to understand their strengths, and to work with them in a cooperative way implies from the practitioners an understanding of empowering aspects of change processes and assuming a role of facilitator.

The challenge practitioners face of combining top-down and bottom-up approaches is also an important aspect that have impact on individual, relational, organizational and community levels of empowerment promotion, where creativity play a special role.

Key words: Empowerment; community empowerment

This paper aims to bring together some basic and crucial elements for empowerment processes, linking individuals and groups towards community empowerment and community capacity. We discuss the relevance of relationships and the crucial role they play in integrative and empowerment promoting processes. This work is also a reflection of a community intervention on a small rural village that aimed to promote community change. We present some theoretical basis for the development of individual, group and community empowerment.

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This work is based on a community intervention on a small rural village that aimed to promote community change. This project was built to promote free time

activities for the village children (top-down approach) and to bring together the children, parents, schools, local administration and local organization so that together they could find out what they wanted to do for the lack of free time activities in the local area (bottom-up approach).

We were able to conduct the research in such a way that we could deepen the understanding of community empowerment and its paradoxes and challenges and that empowerment promotion is a relational challenge and that community development paths are based on relationship building, from the group to the community levels. We share some of our findings.

Zimmerman (2000a) refers to 3 basic aspects of empowerment: participation, control and critical awareness. Participation is the individual's actions that contribute to community contexts and processes;

control is the effective or the perception of ability to influence decisions; and critical awareness is the ability to analyze and understand the social and political environment.

These three aspects are crucial to understand empowerment's theory and practice. Those who participate in decision making and meaningful activities are likely to be empowered (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Wandersman & Florin, 2000; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), although simple participation is not a condition to develop psychological empowerment. Edelstein e Wandersman (1987; *cit.* in Rich et al., 1995) stated that participation can promote empowerment, depending on the nature and the result of the experience. So, participation, according to Eklund (1999), can be "marginal" (when people have none or little influence in the process), "substantial" (when people are involved in defining priorities and activities execution) or structural (when it is a comprehensive component of the project and an ideological basis for all activities).

Control comes with participation in collective processes and is the effective or perception of the ability to influence decisions, mobilize resources and solve problems, building an effective personal and group participation. Control enables the participation process to be gradual and coherent to people's critical awareness. This implies a redistribution of power (cf. Riger, 1993), so the process can be meaningful and real, and participation can boost an empowerment process.

Critical awareness allows, through participation and control, people to understand power structures, decision making processes, and how to influence decisions and mobilize resources (Zimmerman, 2000a).

These three aspects are crucial for constructive internal dialog and praxis, which are crucial elements for empowerment process (Kieffer, 1984). Constructive internal dialog means the internal contradictions that people should feel to respond, in their paradoxical learning process. Praxis is a dynamic cycle of practice and reflection, at the core of empowerment, through which people find new understandings and action, making empowerment a transformative process through action (Kieffer, 1984) – and an active process to structure identity.

So, social relationships and formal and informal social support can play a determinant role for social integration to be as collaborative as possible, building

individual freedom for action coherent to meaningful social relation and bondings, and consequently opening people's minds to diversity.

Kieffer (1984) states that empowerment is a gradual process that takes different stages or "eras" towards participation and commitment, from entry – the initial exploration of authority and social norms; to progress – where peers and mentor support are important to develop critical awareness; incorporation – where organizational and political competencies and confrontation with activity takes place and where proactivity is developed; and commitment – where social action are brought to individual's daily life structure. This means that empowerment is a gradual process that goes from marginal, to substantial and structural participation. Therefore these stages are essential so that active participation can lead to continual community involvement and proactive leadership, building a future for themselves and to community.

During this process, skills and competencies are developed, so one's contribute can also be gradually more effective and structural. Kieffer (1984) stands that empowerment is not about competencies, but it is about participatory competencies, which are a convergence of the practice of all aspects of competence. That means that empowerment is about proactivity and adequate participatory practices in community, which represents a major relational challenge: social interactions through collaborative relationships.

Community psychologists have stated that community contexts should promote interdependence and diversity (Kelly, Azelton, Burzette & Mock, 1994) as well as empowerment (Maton e Salem, 1995). Maton and Salem found 4 aspects in community contexts that promote empowerment: (1) a belief system that promotes growth, based on strengths and focused in something beyond the individual; (2) an opportunity to play a structural role that can be integrative, accessible and multifunctional; (c) a support system that can be inclusive, peer-based and that allows sense of community; and (4) a leadership that is inspired, talented, shared and committed to the context and its members. Kelly, Azelton, Burzette & Mock (1994) consider other aspects like experience interdependence, informal interaction, keep communication channels open, and space to reflection and integration. These contexts should also include face-to-face interaction that promotes the context, opportunity to apply skills that promote

cooperation, social norms where contribute is explicit (beyond he implicit), and valuing the group process.

This perspective on individual, relationships and contexts are crucial for community psychologists. Besides being facilitators for community change, community psychologists can be active players for relationships building – linking individuals and communities – and context building, promoting context's dynamics, functions and meanings. This way, community change can be a consequence of community building.

Empowerment can be viewed at individual, organizational and community level (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000a, 2000b). These levels are interdependent and in each one empowerment can be viewed as a process and as a result (Zimmerman, 2000a). Aguiar and Moniz (2006) state a paradox of empowerment, particularly at collective level. The emphasis on problem solving and action can lead to faster results, although it can imply marginal participation of members – the focus is on results and it can lead to small wins, which are important to mobilize people in the long run, but it can decrease the opportunities for process ownership by members. On the other hand, the emphasis on people's involvement can boost structural participation – the focus is on process, which can facilitate the ownership, although the risk can be the slower capacity to act, that can undermine involvement.

Empowerment interventions should embrace its paradoxical elements (Rappaport, 1981). So, the challenge is to act and involve people and that requires a relational perspective and continual attention. So, collectively, there should be two parallel and complementary tracks, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches Laverack & Labonte (2000). Maton (2000) states that these two approaches have advantages and disadvantages and that its combination allows long term change.

All these aspects should be considered along the community empowerment continuum (Rissel, 1994): from individuals, to small groups, community organizations, coalitions and political action – so that social movements can contribute to community empowerment and capacity, with the purpose of act collectively actions to address community issues and to build healthier and more prosperous communities.

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