

CENTRE NEWS REPORT

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Empowerment & Human Services: a Contradiction?

For the last two years, the Centre has been engaged in a fascinating study of personal empowerment. While difficult to define, personal empowerment, for the purposes of our research, refers to the process whereby individuals feel increasingly in control of their own lives, including the resources they need to live in the community with dignity.

We have worked with a wide range of research participants - people with physical disabilities, individuals with developmental handicaps, low income women, and people who have experienced the mental health system. All of these individuals at some point had experienced a deep sense of powerlessness. Some of these men and women have more recently experienced dramatic changes in their lives, while others have only just begun the process of personal empowerment.

People have shared with us their sense of powerlessness and their struggle to change. They have also identified what helped as well as what hindered the process of personal empowerment.

As a Centre concerned with innovation in human services, we wondered if services played a role in people's powerlessness or in their transition toward personal empowerment.

It should first be emphasized that no one factor created a sense of powerlessness; rather it was a build-up of experiences and factors that created situations where people felt they had very little control. For example, many research participants experienced social isolation and segregation and extremely low expectations by others. These experiences almost always resulted in prolonged dependency upon service systems. A related, more damaging result of being powerless and dependent was people's disconnectedness

from the community - from neighbours, peers, and often from family. Some participants noted how they defined their lives according to the demands, expectations and directions of the services in their lives, and how difficult it was to reframe their view of themselves toward being responsible, involved citizens.

Since service dependency was such a significant aspect of personal powerlessness, it is not surprising that for some people developing a life in the community separate from services was part of their personal empowerment. For others, however, service support was important and helpful in their process of personal change.

For many research participants, one-to-one support was critical. Sometimes this support came from a friend or a peer who may have acted as a mentor. Other times, it was a service worker who provided the support. When people mentioned services that contributed to their empowerment, they identified services that were personalized, interactive, and that gave them a sense of control. They never mentioned congregate, bureaucratic, or institutionalized services as being helpful. The health or social service worker who provided significant one-to-one support was characterized as "a good listener", "an equal", "a guide" and as a person "who really cares".

Our research on personal empowerment has revealed a wide range of insights. Like other research, however, the findings raise many questions and point to the need to examine more closely relationships among personal empowerment, human services, and community participation. In this News Report, we present some of our initial insights in the hope that they can be helpful to those who want to foster personal empowerment, and fashion appropriate human services.

Life in the Community: Four Years After Deinstitutionalization

In 1984 British Columbia closed one of its largest institutions for people with developmental handicaps. The Centre's publication, *Return to the Community*, gave a detailed account of the process of that closure. This year Centre researchers went back to B.C. to meet with people who were part of the earlier study and who have now been living in the community for four to five years. In-depth interviews, participant observation, and surveys have been utilized to gain a picture of life after deinstitutionalization.

Preliminary analysis of our follow-up research suggest that overall people's quality of life of is very much enhanced in the community. Where dissatisfaction is present it more often relates to an absence of meaningful relationships with non-handicapped people and inappropriate groupings of people in living situations. The predominance of the group home has also limited the ways people can connect with the community. This outcome data will be particularly helpful to people who want to ensure that the process of deinstitutionalization will lead to improved quality of life.

The Centre plans to publish detailed findings of this important follow-up study later this winter.

The Role of Natural Networks in Developing Employment Opportunities

As a follow up to the Centre study on employment integration and quality of life, the Centre is currently documenting an employment demonstration project which is currently underway in Kitchener-Waterloo. Integrated Employment Services supports adults with complex needs to obtain meaningful work in integrated employment settings. Unlike traditional approaches to job placement of people who are disadvantaged, IES

uses the individual's natural network to a large extent in helping find an appropriate job for the person.

The project is focusing on people with complex needs who have been working in segregated settings or are completing school. These individuals are identified as having, or having the potential for, a strong support network. This network, or support circle, in conjunction with the IES coordinator, assists the individual in identifying his or her interests, strengths and job capabilities. As these emerge, employment options are developed by the circle in conjunction with the IES coordinator, who provides on-the-job training and on-going support.

Over the course of the next several months, the Centre will be reporting on the outcomes of this approach to supporting people access integrated work.

Workshop on Family Support and Empowerment

The Centre study on empowerment has led us to co-sponsor a workshop on "Enabling and Empowering Families". Workshop leader Carl Dunst, from North Carolina, emphasized that informal, social networking was critical for families who became empowered. This is consistent with Centre findings which indicate that connecting with "significant others" who have become empowered is a critical part of the process of gaining more personal control.

Dunst, who directs a family support agency which integrates service and research, emphasized the importance of families having control over needed resources. It is also clear from this research that utilizing an empowerment approach to providing support and service requires a major shift in the assumptions upon which most agencies base their work.

Seventy-five people attended this workshop. Papers on Carl Dunst's research are available from the Centre for a small charge.

K-W Community Workers
c/o Raise Home Support
115 Water St. N.
Kitchener, Ont. N2H 5B1

Flyers are available from the Centre.

Human Services in the 1990s - Seminar Series

John Lord, Centre coordinator, is the seminar leader for an upcoming Seminar Series sponsored by the Kitchener-Waterloo Community Workers. Four seminars will be held during the next six months. Each event will be held at the Adult Recreation Centre in Waterloo from 12 noon to 1:30. The dates are: November 16, January 18, February 15, and April 19. Registration Fee of \$15 should be sent to:

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Perspectives on Empowerment

"Empowerment is the process whereby individuals feel increasingly in control of their own affairs...for them to be in control is a prerequisite to feeling they can help someone else."

Key Informant
*Centre Empowerment
Research Project*

"All people have existing sets of competencies as well as the capacity to become more competent. Opportunities need to be afforded to individuals or social groups that provide a means to demonstrate existing capabilities as well as learn new competencies..."

Carl Dunst
*Author of Enabling and
Empowering Families*

"People in helping roles have power, and participate in the distribution of resources. One goal of empowerment is a redistribution of valued resources."

Cornell University
Empowerment Group

Personal Empowerment: A Process

Our research has identified a number of factors that assist in the transition to empowerment. There does appear to be a process whereby people move from a sense of powerlessness to more control in their lives. This process has certain characteristics, even though the factors that assist the process vary from person to person. Our research suggests that timing is critical in the empowerment process, as are the interaction of external resources and internal motivations.

Our research also shows that the transition to empowerment for many people was very uneven. Few people became empowered and never looked back. For many vulnerable people, gaining empowerment has been a constant struggle. Empowerment also appears to be both a general phenomenon and context specific. As suggested by the following comments from our study participants it is quite possible, for example, for a person to be empowered in one situation but not in others.

Triggers to Empowerment

The empowerment process generally begins with a variety of motivational triggers including a crisis, frustration or outrage. As noted by one research participant,

Usually any major change, any achievement I've made has been after a time of difficulty---something that has been unpleasant or uncomfortable or just unattainable. That's when I actively go and seek change.

In most cases, this trigger leads to change because individuals learn they have a voice, and that there are people who will listen and understand. The willingness to question was also an important factor here.

Change in context

The process then almost always includes some change in the person's environment or context. That change may be physical, such as the movement from an institution to the community or escape from an abusive situation.

(Living on my own) was really a hard adjustment to make, to realize people expected me to be just like everybody else. On the other hand, that's just what I wanted....

Significant Others

The changing context may be social, and involve new people and new social arrangements. Many people, for example, identified significant others as being both inspiring and/or supportive of their desire to change. These support people may have acted as a mentor or a friend.

I can think of four people who have made a great impression on me, whether it is because they helped me channel energy or whether they just said something that triggered an idea in my mind.

Often the significant other person provided an important bridge for the person to peers, self-help groups, or other community resources. As the process evolved, many people found that their growing awareness of their own capacities and rights helped them to develop a sense of personal control and competence.

Participation and Empowerment

We found that the process of participation was itself empowering. The process appears to be double sided. On the one hand, as people gained self confidence, they sought more avenues for participation; on the other hand, involvement in a community activity enhanced self confidence and personal control.

For the first 27 years of my life I did absolutely no volunteer work and now I'm doing two things. It's sort of like expanding on your growth, your personal growth.

Participation appears to contribute to empowerment because it enhances social contact, reduces isolation, and provides involvement in meaningful activity. Examples

abound in our data; a young woman buys a ham radio, gains a network of ham radio operators, and reduces her loneliness through participation; a disabled man volunteers to edit a newspaper and as a result of his participation, gains a part-time job.

A small number of our research participants pointed to examples where political participation enhanced their confidence. A man who had a variety of community involvements noted;

I have become quite vocal at meetings. I will also write letters, I get involved. I will corner politicians when they're in town if I feel they need praise for what they're doing or I'm going to tell them how unhappy I am.

Several participants also mentioned that they increased their community involvement following an invitation to participate. In some cases, the invitation portrayed a strong message of acceptance and support.

I was just sitting in the restaurant one Tuesday and P.N. came in and he says

'You're the guy I'm looking for to be on the board'... I looked at him, 'No, you've got the wrong person'. 'No I haven't --- you're T.', he said, 'and I was told to come here at 12 o'clock.' I then said, 'I can't read or write or spell'. He said, 'We still want you'.

The process of personal empowerment, then, has several important components; a trigger, a change in context, awareness of options, and participation. At each stage, there are critical supports or resources that may be needed for advancement. For the people who are the most empowered, a shift in their viewpoint or framework occurs. They begin to feel they have control, and situations which earlier seemed insurmountable can now be faced.

These initial research insights about the personal empowerment process obviously have important implications for powerless citizens and for people who are interested in facilitating empowerment.

John Lord
Centre Coordinator



"You're not cut out for this job, Frisbee — you're treating them like human beings again!"

Community (Re)Involvement: The Road From Disempowerment to Empowerment

Living in a community does not necessarily mean being part of the community. Many people live in a geographical community but remain fairly disconnected or isolated from its resources. Our empowerment research indicates that a contributing factor to feelings of disempowerment is the perceived lack of belonging or connectedness with the community in which one lives.

Disempowerment and Isolation

Many citizens experience this sense of disempowerment. As our research shows, for example, people with a physical or developmental disability at birth have their first experience with community disconnection during their childhood. Social isolation resulting from placement in a segregated classroom, being confined to the home, and/or general lack of acceptance by peers is a common occurrence. One woman's comment was typical:

I didn't know anyone outside my immediate family, outside of the people that Dad worked with. I certainly did not have a peer group. I didn't like being alone.

The family forms an immediate support system for all children. The family who has a child with a physical or developmental disability, however, because of the inadequacy of the informal community supports, is eventually forced to turn to the formal service system for assistance. Often when families can no longer maintain support at home, there is no other option but to place the child in an institution. The inability or difficulty parents have in keeping their disabled child in the home environment is reflective of poor community support systems.

One way of finding out how well someone is connected in the community is by going through a personal life crisis and discovering who is there to provide support (physical and/or emotional) and what resources are available for maintaining a life in the community. People with a psychiatric disability usually have become a part of the

community prior to the onset of their disability. Our research shows that their degree of community involvement is uncertain; several people talked about how they felt isolated from family members, and having only a few friends to turn to during their psychotic episodes. As one individual noted:

It was nice living away from home, while in other ways I was surprised that I missed my family more than I thought I would. I think that sense of isolation probably contributed to what happened to me in my first year (of university) - I was becoming chronically depressed.

After the onset of a psychiatric disability, individuals generally turn to the medical profession (as compared to informal community supports) for assistance and treatment. Eventually the person with a psychiatric disability becomes hospitalized.

No one cared, no one was taking me by the hand for a few minutes to get me through this shit - to get me to a place where at least I could begin to recover.

I was having - I was mixed up. I felt that everything was too much for me.

People with a psychiatric disability generally go through a series of hospital admissions and readmissions (the revolving door syndrome). After staying in the hospital for awhile, the individual returns to the community. People with a psychiatric disability may find they can live normally until the pressures begin to build up again and they feel less and less in control - to the point where coping does not occur. Because there is no one to turn to for support they eventually end up back in the hospital. Each time people with a psychiatric disability return to the community they find it more difficult to gain back their previous level of empowerment.

Barriers to Reinvolvement

Institutionalization is the most devastating form of disempowerment.

Individuals with a physical or developmental disability, are generally institutionalized once in their life, usually for an extended period. People with a psychiatric disability encounter a series of admissions. All people placed in institutions felt completely cut off from their communities.

Many people who have been labelled struggle to become a part of their community because a multitude of barriers exist.

People with a psychiatric disability talk about their desire to remain out of the hospital and to attain paid employment. Medication plays a key role in their community life - both positively by controlling their disability, and negatively due to physical side affects.

People with a physical disability also want to live independently in the community. Yet community living is a daily struggle with specific barriers, for example, physical inaccessibility of building structures; limited transportation; dependency upon the service system to provide personal attendant care and technical aids.

People with a developmental disability lead varying degrees of sheltered and segregated lives in the community. There appears to be a lack of information provided to people with a developmental disability about what is available at the community level. Without this general knowledge, people will have a limited perception of their community and what it has to offer.

Community Involvement

For people who have been labelled and segregated, community living and (re)establishing community supports and networks can be quite difficult. Part of community reinvolvement consists of

struggling with the negative attitudes and perceptions of people and professionals within the community, with the stigma of having a disability and of having been institutionalized. The following comment is typical.

I worked and I mean there's a whole lot to tell there, including two attempts to get me fired by sending me to a Public Service Commission psychiatrist because the boss involved knew that I had a psychiatric background.

The idea and reality of independent living in the community (as opposed to institutional living) was a contributing factor to the empowerment process. According to John McKnight, "for those who believe in empowerment, it is here (in the community), surrounded by citizens rather than services that the power of labelled people is most fruitful and creatively expressed."

Mount, Beeman & Ducharme (1988) talk about building a community for people who have been labelled and how the community consists of "a network of personal relationships based on caring, cooperation and mutual growth" (p.21) - all of which contribute toward enhanced quality of life. Material resources are not the only supports required to promote community living. In our study, people supports also played an important role in a labelled person's life. Even though physically living in the community contributes to empowerment, without the true emotional and physical support exchanged within a network of people, individuals do not become truly empowered, nor truly a part of the community.

Meg Van Loon
Centre Researcher

Symbols of Empowerment

When people are in the process of becoming empowered, there are several characteristics or conditions which exist.

POWER: The idea of being able to get others to do what you want them to do or carry out your own desires, despite resistance, is defined as power. McClelland has described four components of power, including support (dependency in childhood); autonomy (power orientation); assertiveness (gain information over self and environment); and togetherness (willingness to identify and work with others).

CONTROL AND CHOICE: Closely related to the idea of power is feeling a sense of control over one's life. Having choices and making decisions about one's own life, as well political decisions about services and supports, and policies and legislation which will have personal ramifications are important for people to be involved in the process of empowerment.

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM: Since powerlessness contributes to low self-esteem and social alienation, the process of empowerment helps people to gain in self esteem. This gives people the will and confidence needed to challenge low expectations, unresponsive service systems, and unreceptive communities and citizens.

SENSE OF HOPE FOR FUTURE CHANGE: People in the empowerment process have some hope that the future *can* be different, either through their own actions or

collective endeavors; and are willing to take *risks* to create the kind of personal and political future they feel is desirable.

CRITICAL AWARENESS OF ISSUES: People who are empowered involve themselves in personal and/or political action and change (Biklen, 1983). Anger and frustration with the way one has been excluded, discrimination, bureaucracy, and a generally low quality of life often contribute to political consciousness .

BEING VALUED: People who are valued and nurtured by family, friends and society have a better chance of becoming empowered. The self-help movement often plays a critical starting point for individuals who feel alienated from society. Living a life of poverty makes it very difficult for most people to feel any sense of control over their lives, and thus be involved in a personal empowerment process.

ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE: The nature of relationships between people is a reflection of the valuing that is present. Our language and non-verbal communication contribute to the empowerment process through an emotional union between persons (Freire, 1985; McGee, et. al., 1987; Rose and Black, 1985).

*These are excerpts from a book soon to be released by Peggy Hutchison and Judith McGill. *Community, Integration and Leisure*. Toronto: Leisurability Publications, 1990.

Peanuts



Levels of Empowerment: Linking Personal, Group and Community

In the planning stages of the empowerment study we assumed that the process of personal empowerment would include a period of critical analysis whereby individuals would begin to perceive their life within a broader socio-political context. In other words, rather than seeing themselves as victims of circumstance, people would begin to view their situation in terms of societal attitudes or underlying forms of oppression. This increased awareness (we continued to assume) would incite people to move into a new realm of political or collective action aimed at ensuring social justice for individuals who tend to be marginalized in our society.

Personal Empowerment

We based this assumption on the work of Kieffer (1984) who studied 15 grassroots activists. He presents the view that empowerment is a long-term individual developmental process from a state of powerlessness to a state of socio-political competence. Individuals come to see him/herself as effective, active agents in influencing political decisions affecting their lives and the lives of others.

As we began to interview study participants we threw our assumptions aside and listened to what people were telling us. We interviewed some activists, the leaders of consumer movements, who felt they had no option but to get involved and push for change. We also interviewed people who within the context of their particular situations took enormous risks just by finally gaining some control in their lives. These people took significant steps toward an increased sense of empowerment by such actions as moving out of their parents' home.

As people increased their sense of control, they did not necessarily become more politically active. Most people, in fact, sought ways of increasing their participation and competencies closer to home, with family, friends, and social groups.

From our work, it is clear that the empowerment process is about partly about fluctuations. People did not necessarily

follow a linear path of increasing control and power in their lives. Empowerment is very much a relative concept. It's an assessment of where you stand today compared to your situation yesterday.

The Group and the Community

Similarly, participation in projects, organizations, movements, was not necessarily the logical progression of the personal empowerment process. One woman that we interviewed found herself in the role of president of the board of a consumer organization well before she felt personally ready to tackle such a position. However, her involvement with this organization eventually led to a dramatic surge in her feelings of personal competency and in her organizational and political abilities.

The Complexity of Linking

One way to conceptualize empowerment is to identify three inter-related levels of empowerment; personal, group, and community. While we know little of the links among the levels, some initial insights raise critical questions for consideration.

It is not a matter of having to be part of a group in order to continue to evolve along the empowerment scale; rather it is a matter of recognizing that a complex number of factors intertwine and contribute to the personal empowerment process. Each experience is unique; a set format of empowerment has not emerged from our data.

For people who did get involved and participate in organizations or community activities, the very act of participating was in itself empowering. As people gained self confidence they sought more avenues for participation.

It does appear that groups have the capacity to become empowered, and that such groups can serve as a powerful support to personal empowerment. Similarly, families, employers, and communities which are supportive create a web of support for personal empowerment.

There are many questions that need to be answered concerning the links between the personal, the group, and the community. What kinds of supports or encouragements are needed for people who have never been active in a group before? What can consumer groups learn from our data as they attempt to increase their membership and develop leadership skills among their members? Too often it seems, groups get caught up with their agendas and ignore the personal needs of their members. And yet our data clearly emphasizes the important role of the "mentor" as a way of supporting people in their

personal empowerment process. Maybe groups need to develop "buddy systems".

Our research indicates that it may be possible to operationalize various components of empowerment, which a variety of people might use to enable and support others. All of these issues will be examined in greater depth in the next phase of this research. Our intent is to work in conjunction with consumers and communities to develop practical applications based on the learnings from this study.

D'Arcy Farlow
Centre Board Member

RESOURCES ON EMPOWERMENT

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News Report Notes

Violence and Human Services

Violence in human services has a long, ugly history. The continuing saga of the Newfoundland orphanage, for example, personifies the violence that exists in many institutionalized human services. In the Newfoundland situation, media commentators are fond of saying that the authorities ignored complaints of violence and abuse because it was perpetuated by the church. While this is part of the truth, the other reality is that violence and abuse are more likely to occur in institutions and segregated services. When vulnerable people are congregated "out of sight", abuse can more easily be perpetuated. For an examination of some of the issues around violence in human services and alternatives, see resources from the G.A.Roeher Institute, Downsview, Ontario; the book *Vulnerable* and John McGee's resources.

Canadian Youth - A Research Profile

A recent national study of 13-24 year olds is revealing for its findings and its methodological approach. "Ready for Today: A Comprehensive Survey of 13-24 Year Olds" was based on a survey of more than 2000 young Canadians. Friendship and family are two of the most important values expressed by these young Canadians. Education is seen as the main vehicle for personal achievement and social success. The younger generation also expresses a disconcerting view of the political process. Almost 30% indicate that politics does not interest them at all, while another 34% indicate that politics does not interest them very much. That almost 70% of youth are disinterested in politics is not a happy prospect for the future. On the other hand, this study illustrates the limits of quantitative surveys. We need to know, for example, what kind of politics disinterests the students and when political issues do capture their attention - vital qualitative questions. The authors of this study conclude that Canada's

young people are an aspiring generation, that they have hopes and dreams, and they deserve to be believed in. We hope they are right.

Improving Personal Health - More Money for Medicine Not the Answer

The Canadian medical establishment is fond of telling us that our health care system is in trouble because of lack of money. Recent research clearly indicates, however, that there is no correlation at all between what is spent on health care and the health of people. Unfortunately, as Bruce Livesey points out in a recent article, the public also tend to believe that underfunding is the cause of our health care crisis. Rather, Livesey emphasizes that the current system is incredibly inefficient, including unchecked costs (such as paying doctor's fee for service as opposed to putting doctors on salary), over-surgery and a dependency on expensive technology.

The reality, despite lots of health promotion rhetoric, is that we have a system that increasingly emphasizes "treating illness" over "maintaining wellness". Last year in Canada, over \$40 billion went to hospitals and doctors' services, while only \$1 billion went to public health. Yet we know from research that health status depends on social, economic, and nutritional factors. Focusing on underfunding of the health care system as the problem has some immediate dangers. If governments fail to address the real issues, Dr. Michael Rachlis notes that medicine will "chew up more and more dollars, with fewer results." Eventually governments will reduce funding, and introduce a two-tiered health care system, one for people who can pay and one for poor people. The question is whether the public and governments will address the real issues before it is too late. (For further understanding, see Michael Rachlis, Second Opinion, and Bruce Livesey, "The Medicine Myth", This Magazine , 23:3, 1989).

Mutual Aid & Cooperation Reinforced by Recent Research

The Centre's approach to research has always been closely aligned to principles of collaboration, self-help and mutual aid. A recent book by sociologist Altic Kohn, **No Contest**, analyzes hundreds of studies on cooperation and competition over the past few decades. Kohn concludes that cooperation proves consistently more productive than competition. We are gradually seeing the focus on team work being emphasized in a number of arenas. Children at school learning from each other in cooperative projects, researchers working collaboratively, and team work in business and industry are just a few examples. Human services have much to learn from this research on cooperation and mutual aid. Too many human services isolate people from natural community environments where cooperation is more likely to be part of people's every day life. There are also many cooperative, mutual aid strategies which can be utilized by human services. The emergence of partnership and empowerment models in health and social services create a context for more collaborative approaches.

Powerlessness and Consumerism

Powerlessness is a personal perception and a reflection of the degree to which we actually have control in our lives. In a book entitled **Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture**, Judith Williamson argues that consumerism diverts people from addressing the powerlessness they feel in other parts of their lives, whether it be in their jobs or related to "overwhelming social issues". She argues that consumerism is assumed to be an expression of autonomy, but in reality is a seductive force. For poor people, of course, the crazed sense of consumerism in our culture creates an illusion of empowerment. The push to consume is also a cruel hoax because it trivializes people's real need for money and resources that would help alleviate poverty and disempowerment.