

Part One

# Developing a Theory of Empowerment

## Empowerment and Community Planning

## Introduction

At the beginning of the discussion about developing a theory of empowerment, I want to pause a little over the special character of the study involved in the composition of this part of the book. In my search for thought about power I discovered that theories on this subject are discussed at least in psychology, sociology, philosophy and the political sciences, and in each of these disciplines the discussants almost totally ignore the other disciplines. Investigation of the concept of empowerment guided me to focus on the sphere in which the theories would clarify power relations and also serve as a basis for the creation of a theory of empowerment. In psychology I found new and interesting knowledge on the subject, but it lacked the methodical approach and the complexity required for a meta-theory (Griscom, 1992). Philosophy, as a source from which to create a theory of empowerment, was something I had to eschew because of my lack of methodical knowledge of this domain. Since the contribution of Michel Foucault seems to me to be very valuable and important, this caused me a certain discomfort. Sociology revealed itself as the most fertile source for my theoretical needs. I was especially pleased to find that the meta-sociologists – the creators of sociological knowledge – do not eschew Foucault, whom they place in a category of his own, *Post-Structuralism* (a term which he would almost certainly have rejected, but that is already a subject for a different book). Of the new theories of power I have chosen to deal at some length with five approaches, including that of Foucault, which have served me as sources for developing the theory and practice of empowerment.

The chapter on power is principally a discussion of the essence of power and of different approaches to understanding and defining it. The intention is to provide readers with a definition of power that can serve as a fertile basis for a discussion of empowerment. Hence the definition of power will appear only at the end of this chapter, the subtitle of which could have been *A Quest for the Meaning of Power*.

The collection of data about empowerment set me a different challenge. The literature dealing with the subject has only recently begun producing a systematic methodology of its own (Lee, 1994; Gutiérrez, Parsons & Cox, 1998). Hence, not a few writers about empowerment use the concept intuitively, at times even without defining it. In many cases, only an analysis of the text has made it possible to find in it a definition of empowerment and of the level of empowerment the writer refers to (Heskin, 1991). I also felt it my duty to include in the book a number of persons, like Paulo Freire (Freire, 1985) and Miles Horton (Horton, 1990), who do not directly refer to empowerment, but whose spirit infuses the concept, and who, in their practice and their approach, have been a source of inspiration to myself and to many others.

As I traced the concept of empowerment and the development of the use of the term, I saw how it is gathering popularity. In the sixties, I am told, the concept of empowerment was much in use by radical young people on American campuses who carried the message of the social revolution of those years. One can almost sense how the concept matures and changes its locus together with the members of that generation. In the eighties the term empowerment is used mainly by the populists of the new left in the USA (Boyte, 1984) and by several writers in social work and community psychology. In the nineties the term is expropriated from this distinctive slot. It appears in the newspapers and is uttered by politicians and professionals in the social sciences and the human services in the Western world. As this book is being written – the late nineties – the concept of empowerment is becoming established in the social-political-professional discourse all over the world.

The aim of this brief survey of the spread of the term has been to make perceptible the difficulties of sorting and classification of the different uses that have been made of it. A variety of adjectives have attached themselves to the term, such

as group empowerment, organizational empowerment, social empowerment. Most of the writers have not distinguished between empowerment as a process that occurs in people's lives and empowerment as professional intervention that encourages such a process. It has become clear that empowerment is a common term that refers to more than one kind of phenomenon, and that paths have to be paved within it to clarify its meaning. The development of the concept of empowerment during a period of several years from a remote non-concept (Russel-Erlich & Rivera, 1986) to a widespread and accepted concept has been dramatic. On the other hand, it is very possible that this has always been the way of new social concepts—from a marginal notion with a tentative character to one that is accepted, from marginality in the world of concepts to an enthusiastic centrality, innovation, and a multiplicity of uses. It is also possible that the sequel is predictable: a sinking into the routine of the cliché, an exposure of its limitations, a wearing-out and a making way for some other new thing. At this given moment of the development of social thought, empowerment integrates well into the discourse on contemporary social ideologies and values, contributes to this discourse, and provides it with an important moral criterion.

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