

## Chapter 3 Developing a Theory of Empowerment

### In Search of a Meta-theory

Empowerment theory wants to make a place for itself among those new social theories that are attempting to connect the personal and the social, the individual and society, the micro and the macro. Connecting the individual and the collective in a way which is not organic-biological or systemic-mechanical is not unique to the present study: this is the great challenge of sociology in recent years (Ritzer, 1988). In our case, the search is for a connection between the micro level and the macro level. For the individual – the micro level – the empowerment process is a process of increasing control and transition from a state of powerlessness. Community empowerment – the macro level – is a collective social process of creating a community, achieving better control over the environment, and decision making in which groups, organizations or communities participate. Beside these two we have to develop the theoretical meaning of empowering professional practice, through which an abstract theory is translated into a practical tool of intervention.

An empowerment theory requires a convincing integration of the micro and macro levels in order to make clear the interrelations among individual, community, and professional empowerment. In the search for this integration, I will present three theories which have taken on the challenge of connecting the individual and his behavior with the society and its processes. Drawing on these, I will go on to propose a theory of empowerment processes.

### Integration of Micro and Macro Levels in Feminist Thought

The declaration that the personal is political is the feminist rationale for removing the separating fence between the micro as a personal domain and the macro as a public domain. The split between the personal and the public domains is essentially a social means of isolating women and separating them from communities which could validate their views about life and society (Ackelsberg, 1988). The recognition of the existence of mutual influence between private activity and social structures demands a connection between the personal world and what happens in political and public life. The change in the values and beliefs of the individual woman, in the goals that she sets herself, in the life-style she chooses and in the understanding of her existential problems is a political declaration that is aimed at a change of the social structures that influence her life (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986).

The concept *social individuality* (Griscom, 1992) makes the feminist dialectics explicit. The woman is an individual within the social reality in which she grows up and develops with the contradictions between her and society. According to this holistic view, the separation between self, others, and community, is artificial, because these three create one another within a single complex whole. The powerlessness of one woman, which changes by means of her activism in collaboration with others in her situation, is a process that empowers the entire community of women.

Feminist thought attacks the illusion of objectivity. Since knowledge about the social world is always created from a social position, no comprehensive and uniform social outlook really exists. People positioned in different places in the social structure know different things about the world. Hence, when a social view is presented as objective and exclusively valid, it is only an expression of the excessive rights that a certain group has appropriated for itself in the social order (Lengermann & Neibrugge-Brantley, 1988).

Several important ideas follows from this thinking:

The work of production and maintenance in society is done by subordinates whose work is in most cases invisible, and because of a dominant social ideology is not appreciated either by the society or by those who actually do the work. As a consequence, the understanding of the real components of production in society is distorted (Markusen, 1980). A senior manager in a large company can devote all his time to his job thanks to his wife, who takes care of him, their children, his elderly parents, and their home. For the firm, and for the society as well, the invisible work of this woman is of no economic value. It is women, irrespective of their status, who do most of this invisible work, not only in the domestic domain, cleaning, cooking, maintenance, and providing emotional and sexual services. In paid work too they do most of the activities of coordinating, such as waiting, arranging meetings, mediating, being interrupted, which are also considered unimportant. Another part of women's work, which is more obvious in its contribution to social production – motherhood – receives social glorification and idealization, which convert it into an unrealistic experience.

As a consequence of this women walk on a *line of fault* that separates the dominant ideology about their role in social life from their actual experience as they understand it. The incompatibility between the private reality and the social generalizations creates a constant dissonance with reality, and women navigate their lives according to this sense of separation between them and the society. On this line of fault, women navigate in different ways: some by repression, some by acquiescence, some by rebellion, and some by an attempt to organize social change (Lengermann & Neibrugge-Brantley, 1988).

All that has been said here about women may be applied analogously, although not in a totally identical form, to all powerless people who are subordinate to others. These people cannot express themselves as individuals, and silently accept other people's interpretations of their actions and failures.

This is the source of the culture of silence that characterizes life in conditions of inequality (Gaventa, 1980).

The conclusion of feminist theory is to question accepted categorizations that were developed by disciplines that are basically dominated by men (such as sociology, for example). The aim is to create alternative concepts which can help to explain the world as it appears to its invisible and disadvantaged subordinate subjects (Lengermann & Neibrugge-Brantley, 1988).

Theorists must engage in dialectical analysis of the knowledge process, and be conscious of the constant tension that exists between the subject and the object—each affecting and changing the other. The knower (the subject, the theorist) has to admit his interaction with the knowledge (the object), for knowledge about the social world is always created from a social position.

The connection between the personal and the political, which characterizes the feminist approach, has been warmly adopted into the theory of empowerment, as has the premise that feminism is valid not only for women, but also for everyone whose world is characterized by oppression and marginality. Empowerment wants to turn public attention to the distress of groups that are in need of social change.

### The Transactional Approach in Environmental Psychology

The transactional theory in environmental psychology (Altmann & Rogoff, 1987) proposes a bridge between the micro level – the person – and the macro level—the environment. In the transactional approach, which is influenced by both phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Mehan & Wood, 1975), the unit of analysis is a holistic entity – an event, generally – in which people, psychological processes, and environments are involved. The transactional whole is not composed of separate parts (like the whole in systems theory), but is a compound of inseparable factors that

are dependent upon one another for their very meaning and definition. The whole – person-environment – is a happening that is changing all the time. Various aspects of the event accord mutual meaning to one another, for in a different setting, or with different actors, a particular person would have acted differently. The observer (the researcher), too, is part of the event, since she defines the event and its boundaries, and her approach and behavior dictate part of the phenomenon. Understanding the observer during the event, her point of view, her role and her position, is part of the interpretation of the event. The transactional theory is pragmatic, eclectic, and relativistic. Despite its ambition to be able to predict, it recognizes that the events are liable to be idiosyncratic and non-recurrent.

Several principles stem from this theory:

1. Change is a property of the whole entity—of the event itself. Change is expected since processes are temporary by their very definition. An understanding of the change – of how it comes about and of its form – is required in order to understand the phenomenon, and not, as in other approaches, in order to understand the change and its reasons. The description and analysis of the event focus on the study of process and change.
2. Since the basic research unit is *an event* involving psychological, temporal, environmental, and social aspects, any focus of the research on one of these aspects turns the others into a context. For example, if the focus of the study is the psychological aspects of an event, then the physical environment is its context.
3. The perceptions and perspectives of the participants in an event are important for an understanding of the event. The analysis is not done solely from the perspective of the researcher who, as already noted, is one aspect of the event. The transactional approach studies the ways different observers interpret the same event.
4. Methodological eclecticism: Research methods are produced out of the event, not imposed upon it. The

theory and the structure of assumptions are constants, while the strategies of study may vary. A study is designed according to the problem and the question being studied. Hence, even when it is not possible to do the research empirically, it is important to report and acknowledge this, so that even without empirical research it will be possible to understand the entire picture theoretically.

From transactional theory, empowerment theory has taken the place of the professional as an inseparable part of the social situation itself, the emphasis on the process, and the freedom to move between focus and context that this theory permits the researcher.

### Structuration Theory: Giddens' Duality of Structure

Giddens' structuration theory (1982, 1984) – which is also called the theory of duality of structure, after its central principle – is the most developed among those sociological theories that integrate micro and macro levels of analysis (Ritzer, 1988). On this theory, the social structure has neither primacy nor preference over the human agency, and vice versa. Social structure is the outcome of human action, and this action is made possible within the boundaries of the social structure in which it takes place.

Giddens makes use of the term “system” to describe the overt pattern of social structures. The social outcomes – both the intentional and the unexpected – are an embodiment of the actions of human agencies. Social systems are reproduced social practices that are embedded in time and space.

Rules and resources are drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action. At the same time they are the means of system reproduction (the duality of structure). Human agency is enabled by means of social rules and resources. The rules guide and inform the action, and the resources provide it with energy: purpose, power, and efficacy.

The three concepts that are central to an understanding of human agency and the social structure are communication, power, and sanction. These represent human actions as well as structures of meaning (communication), systems of rule and authority (power) and systems of morality and legitimation (sanctions).

Giddens breaks the mechanical character of *social structure*, in that he sees it as a cluster of rules and resources, and hence a fundamental part of human activity, and not as an obstacle to activity. Structure is always both constraining and enabling (Ritzer, 1988).

**Communication.** In order to communicate, people draw interpretative schemes from symbolic structures of signification.

**Power.** A system of domination is made possible due to the existence of social structures of rule and authority.

**Sanctions.** In order to impose sanctions, people rely on norms which are part of a social structure of morality and of a system of legitimation.

The concepts of structure and action are produced and reproduced on the human agency level, and exist as concepts of meaning on the social structure level.

I have chosen the structuration theory as a basis for empowerment theory because it is critical, self-critical, holistic, relates directly to the concept of power, and binds micro and macro phenomena in the one explanation.

The principle of duality of structure is suitable as an explanation for the various levels of empowerment, as it is for analysis of any social process. Individual empowerment is human agency whose structural outcomes are not intentional; it may have structural consequences but these are not the essence of the process. Community empowerment is human activity that has structural and organizational aspects, which are aimed at changing social systems and creating structural alternatives. Professional practice is another form of human agency, one that is made possible through existing social systems. When its outcomes are oriented to producing the two kinds of empowerment, it is called *empowering*.

## A Theory of Empowerment

### *A Definition of Empowerment*

In my search for a suitable meta-theory, I wanted to establish the idea that the development of a theory of empowerment needs to draw its inspiration from interdisciplinary and multidimensional theories. From here on, I will present a contextual, interdisciplinary and multidimensional theory of empowerment.

Empowerment is a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one's life, destiny, and environment. This transition can manifest itself in an improvement in the perceived ability to control, as well as in an improvement in the actual ability to control.

Disempowering social processes are responsible for creating a sense of powerlessness among people who belong to groups that suffer from stigma and discrimination. A sense of powerlessness leads to a lack of self-worth, to self-blame, to indifference towards and alienation from the environment, beside inability to act for oneself and growing dependence on social services and specialists for the solution of problems in one's life.

Empowerment is a transition from this passive situation to a more active situation of control. The need for it is part of the realization of one's very humanity, so much so that one could say that a person who is powerless with regard to his life and his environment is not realizing his innate human potential. Since the sources of powerlessness are rooted in social processes that disempower entire populations, the empowerment process aims to influence the oppressed human agency and the social structure within the limitations and possibilities in which this human agency exists and reacts.

We may therefore conceptualize empowerment processes as three interwoven processes which complement and contribute to one another:

The process of individual empowerment, which actually can occur in an immense variety of circumstances and conditions, without any connection to the other two processes, but when it occurs in the course of active participation in social change processes in groups and organizations it has a special value for both the individual and the environment.

The process of community empowerment is a social change process which involves organizing and creating a community. A collective with a common critical characteristic, that suffers from social stigmas and discrimination, acquires ability to control its relevant environment better and to influence its future. Community empowerment processes develop a sense of responsibility, commitment, and ability to care for collective survival, as well as skills in problem solving, and political efficacy to influence changes in environments relevant to their quality of life.

Empowering professional practice is methodical intervention aimed at encouraging processes of individual and community empowerment. Empowering professional practice is professional activity that stems from social systems with the aim of encouraging processes of increased control of those individuals and communities in whose lives these systems intervene.

### *Individual Empowerment, or the Importance of the Human Agency*

The potential for empowerment, like one's very humanity, exists in everyone, and the ability to make a difference is a component of human existence. Systematic and permanent limitation of one's ability to exert power is a negation of one's very humanity. A human agency ceases to be such if it loses the ability to influence the world in some way (Giddens, 1984). To be a human being in the full sense of the word,

then, means to carry out intentional acts in order to achieve defined goals, that is to say, to influence the environment, to be able to bring about change.

Circumstances exist in which people's humanity, in this sense, is not realized. At times so many limitations are placed upon a person's ability to exert power that he is unable to act at all. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental difference between inability to act because one has no choice, and lack of ability to act. Not every case of inactivity may be seen as lack of ability to act (Mann, 1986).

The contextual theory of empowerment confirms the connection between the private and the political. It analyzes individual issues in social life politically. The individual interprets the politics of her life on the basis of the knowledge available to her about political achievements in the social domain. In the Western democracies, people are conscious of certain social values. They know that there exists a fundamental demand for autonomy and free independent functioning; and also that freedom and responsibility co-exist socially in a certain balance. Although people are not free in any absolute sense of the word, they are supposed to be free from limitations and conditions of exploitation, inequality and oppression. On the individual level a *private* political response to these ideas develops; Giddens calls this *life politics* (1991). On the collective level, life politics focuses on what happens to people who have achieved a degree of consciousness and initial ability to act, and are in need of community empowerment processes in order to realize their aspirations for personal autonomy.

### *Community Empowerment, or the Social Structure's Shaping Influence*

The individual, then, in seeking his personal political interpretation – a quest which is a result of the individual empowerment process – creates expectations for change on the social structure level. Community empowerment takes

place when expectations for change which have accumulated in the social structure in the form of abstract structures begin to materialize. In other words, one could say that individual empowerment creates a reservoir of community potential. Beyond this potential, community empowerment requires resources of its own in order to be realized. It draws these resources from two sources which must be available with a certain coordination between them:

1. Individuals who have come to recognize that they are interested in acting not only to realize their own personal desires, although still in the framework of improving their quality of life.
2. External change agent – professionals and others who are involved in a planned change process and contribute rules and resources to it – meaning, legitimation, and power – which support the creation of a community and its growing ability to influence the environment.

The concept of *life politics* emphasizes the democratic context of the concept of empowerment. The empowerment process is conditioned by what already exists – by the social structure that enables or limits it. Regimes that do not recognize the individual's right to act and to change, and emphasize the duty of obedience as the essence of man, shape social processes in a very different way than the democratic regime which, at least on the expectations level, permits and encourages the individual's participation in public decisions.

This is how the duality of structure principle operates. Beside the social activity, the extent to which there exists a social structure that provides legitimation to civic participation – political regime, policy, resources – influences the character and the route of the empowerment process, and is a critical factor for the chances of initiating it. However, human agency has a variety of ways and means available to it in order to exert control on life, even in conditions of severe structural limitations. Hence, social relations, even when they are asymmetrical, are always mutual, and a person is never



without resources to the point of absolute lack of ability to exert influence on others (even if they have privileged access and control over ability and resources) (Davis, 1988).

Empowering professional practice encourages and facilitates processes of increased control of individuals and collectives over their lives and environments. It develops intervention methods through which people can effect changes in their lives. In the empowerment process people learn to take on socially valuable roles, to exercise social skills, to exert interpersonal influence, to develop commitment, to take responsibility and to acquire political efficacy. The acquired abilities contribute to the joint goals of empowering themselves as individuals and as a community.

Resources of the individual kind exist in every environment and may also be discovered there spontaneously. Few communities have developed from situations of powerlessness to belief in themselves and ability to make independent decisions through their own inner resources alone (by *boot straps* processes). The encounter between the community and practitioners who use empowering professional methods is not spontaneous; it is generally a synthetic occurrence embedded in a social system. It can stem from planned policy (Couto, 1989; Feldman & Stall, 1994), or from the professional's individual moral decision (Schuman, 1987).

The empowerment process produces a synergy that encourages the preservation and reproduction of the process (Katz, 1984). As the empowerment process progresses the empowering professional practice is reinforced, and from the outcomes of the process and from the process itself it receives proofs of its effectiveness and in certain cases also legitimation from the system. On the action level, the practitioner accumulates experience and professional confidence, as well as new knowledge. On the structure level a potential for creating new social systems based on empowerment-enhancing communications, norms, and forms of authority is created. The empowerment process also limits the professional practice, because at its peak it eliminates

the need for its services. The more the empowerment process progresses, the weaker becomes the dependence on professionals (principally on the empowering professionals, who deliberately avoid developing dependence), and they become less essential for the continuation of the process. When a community achieves empowerment it no longer needs the professional services that were essential in the stages of transition from powerlessness.

Social knowledge is neither objective nor neutral; it either contributes to social liberation or it encourages exploitation and social domination. By the same principle, empowerment practice cannot be neutral either: a professional who does not advance empowerment almost certainly hinders it. The rules of empowering practice also apply to an interpretative social theory, which must therefore be a critical theory too, because it is not only the social scientist who produces and interprets knowledge, but also the people who are the objects of the research participate in its creation through their activities that produce and reproduce it (Giddens, 1982). Such double hermeneutics is called for in order to give validity to the knowledge created both by the people living in the society and by the social sciences.

#### *Duality of Structure Dynamics in Empowerment Processes*

**Empowerment Processes.** Duality of structure emphasizes an important dynamic aspect of the empowerment process: empowerment potential exists not only in terms of people's personal resources and abilities, but also in terms of the rules and regulations of the social structure. The connection made by Giddens (1984) between social structure and human agency reinforces the theoretical explanation of the way community empowerment contributes to individual empowerment. Hence, empowerment may be compared to a circular process of social change and activation of abilities and resources, in which human agents in need of empowerment act together with empowering human agents. The social structure that is

produced by means of this activity includes preservation and reproduction of elements from the existing social structure, and a moral process of critical social analysis.

In the communications domain, empowered people learn to understand their situation differently, and thus create a symbolic structure that they share, one which gives them a new social meaning of their situation and their relations with others. In the normative domain, people learn to appreciate anew certain social norms that affect them. They start taking an active part in the moral discourse, and change it by the very fact of their joining it. Through this new social participation they can impose sanctions against social systems with which they had previously acquiesced to their own detriment. Empowerment may be described in terms of individuals' ability to effect change, but one cannot understand the power of a particular person, which is expressed in his own specific activity, without relating to the existing structures of control that this person reinforces, interprets and changes through his behavior. Personal efficacy draws its strength from structural forms of control that are embedded in social systems (Clegg, 1989). Hence, the empowerment process depends on what already exists in the society, but the success of the process is defined by what and how much changes on the personal level, the community level, and the social systems connected with the process.

Community empowerment depends on the acquisition of ability and on access to essential resources, which can be divided into two kinds: allocative resources and authoritative resources. Allocative resources are material resources such as raw materials, technologies, and products produced through the combination of these. Authoritative resources are organizational resources which can be divided into three kinds: 1. Organization of social time-space, i.e., the creation of paths of daily life. 2. Organization of human beings in mutual association. 3. Organization of life chances: the constitution of chances of self-development and self-expression (Giddens, 1984).

The degree of access to necessary resources of both these kinds is what determines the degree of ability to act and to influence. The less accessible these resources are to a person, the further she is from the ability to influence the social structure or to influence the creation of rules and laws (which also determine the degree of people's distance from resources).

Empowerment creates a change in human behavior and in the social structure. The potential for community empowerment exists in every environment, just as the potential for individual empowerment exists in every person. In every process of individual empowerment there also exists a potential for community empowerment, and every process of community empowerment creates an environment that facilitates individual empowerment and at the same time also shapes and determines its form (Maton & Rappaport, 1984).

What are the intended outcomes of this process? Since we are speaking about a theoretical process, it is open to an infinite number of variations, but we may note a number of outcomes in the course of it:

1. The empowerment process in most cases begins from a sense of frustration: people's sense that there exists an unbridgeable gap between their aspirations and their possibilities of realizing them. People discover that the realization of their aspirations depends on abilities and resources that are beyond their reach (Kieffer, 1984).
2. For the empowerment process to be able to develop, this sense needs to be accompanied by a minimal level of ability and resources to enable organized activity, as well a minimum of social legitimation to permit such activity.
3. Empowerment begins, then, with people's will to obtain resources and means to develop ability in order to achieve something in their lives. The mobilization of resolve and will is a first outcome in the process.



4. People's recognition of their right to express aspirations and their ability to define them is an outcome of developing a critical consciousness of the existing situation (Freire, 1985).
5. People's belief in their own ability to achieve outcomes is an achievement in terms of a sense of individual ability to control one's life (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy may become collective efficacy if it gets translated into the community's practical ability to organize itself for a collective effort to achieve outcomes in the environment.
6. Success in mobilizing resources to continue the process, including resources of knowledge about organizing and setting up community organizations, are outcomes that indicate that the empowerment process has established itself (Mann, 1986). This is a proof that the people have secured for themselves an ongoing ability to achieve outcomes: to control their lives, to participate in decision making, and to influence the environment.

The entire sequence of stages may be any hypothetical empowerment process, and each one of the stages is an end in itself and may also be a starting point for a different empowerment process. The point of departure for change depends on the opening conditions of the particular empowerment process.

**Powerlessness.** It is the social systems which are intended to solve social problems that produce the powerlessness of the people in need of their services, generally not out of bad intentions, but as a by-product of the flawed way that social policy is executed and that public services are given to people in distress (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Rappaport, 1981). Hence, empowerment theory diagnoses powerlessness as a social problem and not an individual problem, and criticizes the conservative tendency to diagnose manifestations of powerlessness, dependence, despair, and self-blame as the personal (at times cultural) problems of individuals.

What all situations of powerlessness have in common is the personal psychological experience of loss of control, which every human being can identify with emotionally. Since there is nobody who has not experienced moments of helplessness and powerlessness, there exists an intuitive understanding of the injuries caused by constant and ongoing powerlessness, and this validates the universality of the need for empowerment.

Disempowerment of people who belong to a particular population group produces powerlessness that influences the lives and futures of the individuals and the fate of the entire community. Powerless people, as already noted, expect a lack of connection between their behavior and desirable outcomes, and defend themselves by means of extreme fatalism, self-contempt, and indifference to their deplorable situation.

As a consequence of the negative valuation that is part of the disempowering processes directed towards a social group, this group is systematically denied identities and roles possessing social value, and important resources (Solomon, 1976, 1985). These two – roles and resources – are the basis for the exertion of interpersonal influence and for effective social functioning. Hence, inability to exert interpersonal influence and inability to function effectively in society, which various theories identify as personal problems, are structural manifestations of powerlessness.

Duration is what differentiates between states of constant and ongoing powerlessness and situations of powerlessness that originate in a crisis or in stress and can happen to any person or any group. In crisis situations, too, there are manifestations of powerlessness, but without systematic and structured disempowerment.

Nonetheless, there may be a subtle difference between the two situations of powerlessness, the temporary and the chronic. We can learn something about this from the vulnerable situation of new immigrants in Israel, who in the first stages of their absorption into the society should be regarded as a population in crisis. The transition from the country of origin

to Israel creates a rupture that is accompanied by feelings and manifestations of powerlessness. The expectations of both the immigrants and of the established society are that this is a temporary situation which will pass when they become part of the local society. However, beside groups of immigrants who experience a temporary crisis and then do become part of the society, other groups of immigrants are exposed to systematic and ongoing disempowerment that includes discrimination and stigma, and leads to powerlessness with all its difficult manifestations. The conclusion is that in Israeli society a tendency exists to selectively disempower certain groups of immigrants. To identify the victims is a relatively simple matter. They are always the poorest, the weakest both physically and psychologically, or those who are most conspicuously different in cultural or ethnic terms. The combination of economic/organizational weakness and cultural difference creates an especially high risk of powerlessness.

From this example we can learn that in every case where a crisis event occurs in the life of a social group, even if this crisis is planned, expected and temporary, there needs to be criticism of the practices activated by the social systems that treat the event, in order to identify disempowering policies and practices, to prevent these and thus to prevent the constant and perpetual powerlessness of an entire social group.

Powerlessness, like any social situation, produces adaptive mechanisms in those subject to it, and it is important to identify the principal mechanisms. Powerless people internalize their impossible situation and the blame it entails. They identify with the negative social opinions and accept the society's judgment of their worthlessness. As a means of escaping from their hopelessness and their knowledge that there is no way out of this situation, they tend to internalize the society's values, beliefs and game rules, including those that are directed against themselves. People who are prevented from participating in action that defines them, and from expressing thoughts about their actions, develop a passivity

and give up on the idea of controlling their destiny and their future (Gaventa, 1980). Even when the passive quiescence breaks, it does not totally vanish; its remnants make it difficult for people who have become accustomed to quiescence to express themselves in a clear and stable way. The new consciousness in the stage of emerging from powerlessness is a source of instability and that can easily be manipulated (Freire, 1970). The quiescence of the powerless endangers their future, for it enables the society to speak for them, and tacitly endorses the development of a victim-blaming rationale of powerlessness and a legitimization of its continued existence.

An example of such a rationale is the prevalent conservative position, which claims that a developed political consciousness is the reason for participation in political processes. According to this position, someone who does not participate chooses this course because she lacks political consciousness and therefore prefers to be represented by others. This is a way of explaining non-participation, and also of giving legitimation to the existing situation. However, research has shown that people's participation in political processes augmented their political consciousness (Pateman, 1970). In other words, participation itself creates consciousness no less than consciousness leads to participation, and hence someone who does not receive an opportunity to participate is prevented from developing political consciousness and becoming involved in public matters. In empowerment theory terms, what we have here is not the human agency's choice not to act, but a structural duality which creates a deliberate social outcome: the social structure systematically, by means of structures of sanctions, communications and domination, limits the human agency of particular groups. This limitation is manifested in limited allocation of resources, resulting in the human agency's inability to develop abilities, which condemns them to playing a passive subordinate role in society's production.

**Power Barriers.** How does the allocation of meager and powerlessness-producing resources come about? The society has direct and indirect ways of effecting disempowerment. The indirect power barriers are the ones that are incorporated into a person's growth and development stages, and are transmitted to the child and the adolescent by means of significant others in his life (Solomon, 1976). These are the authoritative resources that the society provides by its organization of social relations and life opportunities, in ways which, although covert, have a most profound influence (Giddens, 1984). The direct power barriers, that originate in the allocative resources, are implemented against the individual directly through the practices of social systems. The authoritative and allocative resources integrate the direct and indirect power barriers into a single structure of rationalization and legitimation: the liberal approach, which encourages the non-participation of the poor in political life, gets internalized in the child by means of his parents, who have accepted their negative social valuation, and when he grows up, it is transmitted to him directly by means of the meager allocation of the allocative resources, from the education system through to old-age pensions.

Due to the penetrating thoroughness of the integrated power barriers, as long as the consciousness of the powerless does not change in a stable and fundamental manner, no significant change in their situation may be expected (Gaventa, 1980). Their emergence from a situation of powerlessness, then, demands a great effort, in contrast to the relatively small steps that need to be taken to maintain their existing situation. To overcome the power barriers is much harder than to preserve them. However, when a change process begins, it is self-reinforcing. When a barrier collapses, this means a change in the rules and structures of meaning and legitimation. These lead first to changes in the allocation of the allocative resources (the material resources), and, with much more difficulty, also to changes in the authoritative resources (the organizational resources) (Clegg, 1989). Hence

the breaking-down of one power barrier accelerates and facilitates further progress. This is an example of the synergy involved in the empowerment process and of the motivating power of success, which brings about an improvement of self-image in the course of acquiring abilities and obtaining resources which originate in the empowering professional practice. The question of whether these processes fundamentally influence the field of power relations will be discussed further on (Gaventa, 1980; Clegg, 1989).

**Organizational Outflanking.** Organizational outflanking is yet another conceptualization, sophisticated in its simplicity, of the power barriers (Mann, 1986). Its claim is that powerlessness is nothing but a submission to power's organizational advantage. Because of this concept's strategic importance to empowering practice, it is worthwhile to become acquainted with the two categories of response to organizational outflanking.

#### *Conscious Submission to Organizational Outflanking*

In certain social conditions, the knowledge and consciousness of the outflanked is of no practical value. Their inactivity stems from knowing the price they would have to pay for struggling with the organizational outflanking. Such submission covertly undermines the conception that development of critical consciousness is the beginning of a practical change process. This gives further support to the claim that individual empowerment does not necessarily lead to community empowerment.

The conscious submission to organizational outflanking makes perceptible the affinity of the concept of empowerment, on all its levels, with the democratic context. An event which occurred in a different context describes the regime's brutal response to a community empowerment process in a town in Venezuela, where the residents built homes for themselves by themselves, assisted by professional practice of people from the nearby university. The regime's response made it clear to anyone who needed clarifications that a dictatorial regime

sees even personal empowerment as a threat that has to be eliminated. Although they were conscious of their situation, and possessed not-inconsiderable abilities, the local residents did not manage to advance in their community empowerment process, because the social structure they live in entails dangers to the lives and property of any human agency focused on change (Sanchez et al., 1988). In Israel, the occupation regime in the territories provides daily examples of frustration of attempts to organize and of independent community expression.

An example of conscious submission to organizational outflanking in a democratic society is an event in which a group of parents participated in the running of an open school, but was pushed to the margins as a consequence of the teachers' taking control of all the school's organizational frameworks. The parents, who lacked organizational means of their own, remained outside the decision making process and ceased having an influence. The researchers Gruber & Trickett (1987) analyzed the process by dividing the concept of empowerment into psychological empowerment and political empowerment. Psychological empowerment was described as a personal process that is not dependent on organizational means, and this was achieved by the parents. Political empowerment was defined as actual participation in decision making; this was not achieved by the parents. Had the researchers analyzed the situation with the assistance of the organizational outflanking theory, they would have reached the conclusion that the parents, despite their consciousness of their situation, had difficulties in realizing empowerment because they were organizationally outflanked by the school.

#### *Unconscious Submission to Organizational Outflanking*

The unconscious response to organizational outflanking is attributed to three factors: the ignorance, the isolation, and the exclusion of the outflanked (Mann, 1986).

Ignorance is considered the major cause of powerlessness, mainly because of the absence of tools and abilities that

accompanies lack of knowledge. People are unable to describe and conceptualize their situation, and their powerlessness deepens because of the quiescence that accompanies ignorance. This connects with the two other factors – exclusion and isolation – which are responsible for preserving the status quo of the ignorance of the outflanked (Gaventa, 1980).

Isolation of groups from one another so that they will not be able or interested to organize themselves is an old and tested strategy in the service of power. The advantage of strategies of isolation and exclusion is that they are commonplace to the point of banality, and at the same time are easy to camouflage.

An example that demonstrates how common is the use of methods of exclusion for purposes of organizational outflanking are the procedures for the participation of residents in the Israeli *Urban Renewal* project, which began in 1978 and has actually not been completed to this day. From 1980 on, the authorities engaged in the project instituted neighborhood elections as a condition for participation of residents in the formal decision making processes. In this way a separation was effected between the elected representatives of the residents, who received appointments to participate in the committees, and other representatives of the residents, who were not given right of entry into the official decision making process. Further separations were also instituted in the same project. For example: between owners and rent payers in public housing; and between the more established residents of the neighborhood and people in need of welfare services (Alterman and Churchman, 1991).

#### *Empowerment as Social Transformation*

Does empowerment create a fundamental change in the power field that it occurs in? This is a Foucaultian question, which therefore has no simple answers, for an answer which is not complex and dialectical, which generalizes and simplifies, serves the existing power relations. If we see empowerment

as a local resistance to power, then its occurrence does not transform the field of power relations itself very much. This analysis is correct for individual empowerment in particular. Through his own empowerment a person gains a higher level of consciousness about his place in the power relations, but his achievements are not felt in the existing power fields (although they do add to the potential for social change, as Giddens [1984] presumes).

Michel Foucault claimed that there are human actions and phenomena that have managed to elude the net of power and to preserve their freedom, and then institutionalization is the major danger to their existence. In his view, the very endeavor to develop new knowledge around empowerment, and to organize it in an institutionalized way, as the present book is attempting to do, is liable to turn a phenomenon that means more control by the individual over her life and her fate into yet another domain under the supervision and surveillance of power. Conceptualization of empowerment may be interpreted as yet another attempt by power/knowledge to take control of the field of humane social phenomena.

This is one of the problems in a Foucaultian analysis. Any attempt to organize knowledge in an ordered way is suspect as an attempt at *normalization*—at judgment and domination. Nonetheless, there is truth in this extreme position: a phenomenon that is adopted by the scientific establishment and is disseminated under its auspices to social institutions is liable to lose its authenticity (as a substantiation of the validity of Foucault's claim, we may cite the mechanical use of the concept of *creativity* since it was adopted by educational and therapeutic institutions and became distorted while being activated in their framework). Foucault justified his refraining from creating a theory in the domain of power as a refusal to cause harm to any social subject that is condemned to scientific generalization. Anyone who agrees with him can go on developing a theory only within this contradiction, in the hope that Foucault's evaluation of the extent of the interconnections between

the technologies of power and social knowledge was an exaggerated one.

Although insufficient evidence exists about the fundamental social change that empowerment will bring about if and when it is adopted as a policy and a professional practice, Foucault himself demonstrated how a written idea may serve power relations and provide a direction for development of technologies (1979). Any new idea, any linguistic innovation, then, has this opportunity of bringing some fresh innovation to the accepted perspectives and conceptions in the domain in which it appears. Likewise, any such innovation may be implemented in different and contradictory directions. Empowerment emphasizes the ability to control that is innate in every person, the importance of context for an understanding of this ability, the special place of human solidarity and of community in this context, and the roles of professional people in changing the disempowerment produced by social systems. It is thus different from the ideas about achievement, competition, and selfish individualism that (according to Foucault as well) characterize the knowledge that acts in the service of technologies of power.

A Foucaultian interpretation will also claim that empowerment promises too few outcomes in the field, and places too much emphasis on the consciousness and feelings of individuals and groups without changing their actual situation. In this way empowering practice is liable to turn into a technology in the service of power, which helps deprived groups to be more contented in their deprivation. This is not a totally groundless possibility, especially if we agree with Foucault's evaluation that power in the Western world is characterized by the sophistication with which it conceals itself.

Any focus on individual empowerment arouses a Foucaultian interpreter's suspicion, and in the writing on empowerment in social work such an orientation exists (Lee, 1994; Miley et al., 1998). When the professional practice focuses on the individual question of who is empowered and who is

not, this question becomes yet another criterion for judging people and separating between them, as is common in typical power technologies. Hence, empowerment as knowledge cannot limit itself to developing an individualistic therapeutic approach. Despite its originality and importance, such an approach will limit itself to implementing knowledge in the service of veteran social institutions (the welfare services, for example). Empowerment is valid as a new approach (and a new idea) only when it is implemented on the social level.

### *Politics of Empowerment*

When a chance for social change exists, the next question that follows is what will be the character of the process of social change, or what kind of politics characterizes empowerment. One could answer that generally it seeks social legitimation and consensus, and the use of the concept of life politics attests to this (see above). Empowerment is not interested in appearing as a revolution, but as a new social agreement—a social contract. Empowerment is a demand, in the name of shared social values, for recognition of the harm caused to certain populations as a consequence of manipulation of some of these values against them. Empowerment is a hope that on the basis of a platform of shared values it will be possible to reach conclusions and to change policies and practices that are prevalent in social systems.

From a Foucaultian perspective, at least three remarks are called for on this subject.

1. Since there are no possessors of power, there is in fact no-one to approach. However, it is necessary to ensure the development of a new professional consciousness. In too many cases people ask technical questions – such as *How is it possible to improve the welfare system?* – and do not ask essential ones—such as *What does the welfare system do to the people in need of it?* Empowerment poses such questions (Rappaport, 1985).

2. Since there is no-one who stands outside power, and everyone is activated by the same technologies, then, as already stated, even someone who feels he has power is manipulated and entrapped by it. If only for this reason, it is worth abandoning the prevalent belief that power relations are a zero sum game. This belief results in a refusal to share resources of power with others, thus perpetuating isolation and separation among people, even in opposition to their interests.
3. In a democratic regime we can relate to empowerment as a kind of legitimate resistance that serves as a brake and a substitute for much more dangerous alternatives (Minson, 1986). Empowerment is an idea that is compatible with liberal democratic ideas, and hence Western democratic society is capable of digesting it without shocks, and even to gain some advantages through it. Power is prepared for tactical losses in order to gain a strategic advantage, and empowerment may be a tactical loss of this kind.

### *“What Does Empowerment Do?”*

Foucault, and Giddens after him, would have wanted to investigate the unintentional outcomes of the empowerment processes. At first glance this would be a superfluous investigation, because empowerment was born out of the critique of harmful by-products of social programs that have not asked What does the program do? (Swift, 1984). In fact, however, it is important to investigate the connection between the discourse on empowerment and the empowering professional practice, and also to analyze technologies that declare themselves as empowering, in order to understand what does empowerment do, or how it influences people beyond its overt messages (Rojek, 1986). Like any new concept, empowerment too can lead intentionally or unintentionally to the establishment of new social structures and the preservation of existing structures that contradict its principal goals.



If we believe Foucault, power penetrates more and more into our lives as individuals, but at the same time it increasingly camouflages itself behind knowledge and practices that have goals, aims, and a logic of their own. The question is whether empowerment teaches us something new about the existing power relations. Does it expose these relations and increase our consciousness about them, or, conversely, does it contribute to the concealment of the mechanisms of power? Empowerment's test of authenticity, then, lies in its contribution to the creation of a critical social consciousness by means of speaking the truth and exposing unilluminated levels of oppression and discrimination (Habermas, 1975; Forester 1989).

#### *Does Empowerment Stand a Chance?*

In order to realize empowerment processes, reinforcing systems of meaning, power and legitimation are necessary on the level of the social structure. A democratic regime and democratic values provide these better than other regimes. However, the theories of power, as well as everyday human experience, make it clear that in democracy there is no guarantee of fairer or more equitable power relations in every case. The democratic system provides a mechanism, a legitimation, and a moral endorsement for extreme and structured powerlessness. Empowerment theory, then is a product of a democratic climate, and its goal is to deal explicitly with problems of powerlessness created by structures and systems of meaning operating in democratic society.

The advantage of the structuration theory as a meta-theory of empowerment lies not only in the integrated explanations that it provides for phenomena that a contextual theory of empowerment is interested in understanding, but also in the sense of optimism that this theory contributes to the empowerment process itself. Exercise of power is primarily an action oriented to achieving strategic advantages in social relations. The right strategy is more important than the

quantity and the possession of power resources. Instead of asking who has power and who doesn't, and how much power, a more challenging and more optimistic question is redefined from the viewpoint of weak and poor people: how to activate what exists in order to influence the power field in a way that will make possible more control in their lives. The perception of the power relations as mutual and as *a non-zero sum* provides a way out of the catch involved in the lack of material resources, and turns the realization of empowerment into a more realistic challenge. The centrality of strategic thought reinforces the rationale which says that development of abilities is the main means of emerging from situations of powerlessness, despite the fact that powerless populations suffer also, and perhaps mainly, from a lack of resources.

#### Summary of Part One

The first part of this study dealt with a theoretical development of the concept of empowerment: the first chapter explored insights connected with empowerment in various theories of power. The second chapter presented the connection between empowerment as a personal process and community processes and their influence on powerless people, and also emphasized the role of professional practices as an essential component in the definition of empowerment.

In the third chapter, I looked for a meta-theory suitable to empowerment theory. In the course of my search I found out that not a few theorists look for an integrated explanation for social macro-micro phenomena. I examined three such endeavors, and from these I chose Giddens' structuration theory to serve as a meta-theory for empowerment. Giddens is suitable for this role not only because of the quality of his theory, but also for his values. I appreciated the way he discusses the various theoretical influences that guide him; his sources of inspiration and his values are revealed in the course of his theoretical discussion, and are suitable to a theory of empowerment no less than his theory itself is. The

way in which Giddens exposes the sources of his professional method made my choice of him easier for me, on the meta-practical level of my work as well, and has enriched my approach to the development of a theory in many significant ways.

The contextual theory of empowerment presents the transition from powerlessness to more control in life as a change in both human activity and the social structure. Powerlessness is a social phenomenon that has structural aspects which are rooted in the power relations and the disempowering practices that originate in the social systems.

In the second part I will focus on the empowerment process in the context of community planning. The discussion of the professional practice will illuminate and illustrate various issues of the three empowerment processes, the individual process, the community process, and the professional process.