

Elisheva Sadan

Empowerment and Community Planning

Translated from Hebrew by Richard Flantz

To Yitzhak, Meir and Jonathan — with love.

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Introduction to the E-Book

The hard copy edition of this book was published in 1997 (two more printings were made in 1999 and 2002) in Hebrew, under the same title*. When the book was first published, both empowerment and community planning were relatively unknown—empowerment was a new concept with a lot of potential, arousing curiosity and intellectual debates; community planning seemed to be an old idea about a social construct whose time has passed. In my introduction to the 1997 book (p. 21) I mention my disappointment at the little interest in local change initiatives since the 1960s. This has changed dramatically since then. Locality has arrived again—the “think global—act local” idea has caught, and now *empowerment* is a household term, a bit worn at the seams, and *community* is the new buzz word. The books of Couto (1999), Putnam (2001), Sirianni & Friedland (2001), Smock (2003) and Taylor (2003) are few examples of this bounty.

The revival of the new/old concepts, such as *civil society* and *social capital*, are evidence of how the local organization and its role in the shaping of individuals and societies is perceived now—in a much more appreciative and valuing way.

I enjoy offering my work to English readers in this form, and I would like to state why it might be of interest to you. Empowerment as a concept still needs a theory, as most of the work published on empowerment lacks a theoretical basis. The first part of the book is on theory. The second part focuses on community practice, which is as important now to the ideas of community building and community development as it was ten and twenty years ago, when these ideas were everywhere, but did not get the attention they have now.

* Sadan, Elisheva (1997). *Empowerment and Community Planning: Theory and Practice of People-Focused Social Solutions*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishers [in Hebrew].

The book is mostly an unchanged translation of the original work, except for a few changes in the introduction. Since I did not touch the original references, I offer additional references, published since 1997, at the end of the book (p. 345).

In the foreword to the book in hard copy I thanked many wonderful people who helped me with its conception and development. You will read about them on the next page. Here I would like to thank two more people, who made this form of the book possible. My dear friend Dorit Barak who encouraged me to make the effort, and my son Meir Sadan who designed this format, invented *Mpow.org*, and generally dedicated a lot of his time and talent to this project.

I hope you enjoy this work. I'll appreciate any thoughts you would like to share with me.

Elisheva Sadan,
September 2004

Foreword

During the years in which I wrote *Empowerment and Community Planning* I received assistance, encouragement and inspiration from wonderful people. The pleasure of thanking them is all mine.

The theoretical development of the concept of empowerment was carried out in the framework of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the Faculty of Architecture at the Technion—Israel Institute of Technology. I thank my teachers there, and the institution itself, for the valuable years I spent with them. Special heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Arza Churchman, for being a cornucopia of knowledge, wisdom, responsibility, social commitment, support and friendship.

My thanks to Prof. Yehezkel Hasenfeld from the University of California at Los Angeles for the ideas he contributed to the research, and for his encouragement and support all along the way.

My thanks to the people who helped me research the central concepts in this book, but whose names I may not mention for reasons of secrecy. I thank the tens of community planners who gave me some of their precious time as well as their trust. I thank the students of the school which I may not name, and their parents as well. I thank the parents of children with developmental disabilities who set up a service to grapple with the special problems of their children, and to the community planner who worked with them. My thanks to all the people of all positions and ranks who shared their thoughts and considerations with me.

Introduction

The process of empowerment means a transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one's life, fate, and environment. The process is aimed at changing three dimensions of a social condition, i.e., to bring about a change in: people's feelings and capacities; the life of the collective that they belong to; and the professional practice that gets involved in the situation. These are three inter-related processes that this book will deal with in breadth: individual empowerment, which is the personal, intimate change process; community empowerment, which is the social change; and empowering professional practice, which is the organizational and functional change that encourages the realization of both the above. I will claim further on that a successful planned change process, oriented to increasing people's control over their lives, has to achieve outcomes in all three dimensions of empowerment.

Why is it important to raise the issue of people's control over their lives and environments? And why, today more than ever, does the question of empowerment require an answer more urgently and more vigorously?

The concept of empowerment is an attempt to break the circle of vicious social problems which are difficult to resolve. People suffer and are harmed not only because of neglect and apathy, but also because of the attention of bad social services. On the threshold of the 21st century it is becoming clear that groups suffer from powerlessness not only because of indifference, cruelty and a shortage of resources in the impoverished parts of the world, but also because of humanly degrading social solutions in the ostensibly enlightened portions of democratic society.

Empowerment is first and foremost an ideology and a world-view, and only someone who accepts its values can attain a deeper understanding of the details of its processes and the methods of its practical implementation. We therefore

have to somewhat expand the discussion about the kind of ideology which the concept of empowerment represents.

The adoption of a concept is an opportunity to refresh and renew conventional ideas and methods of action. In the worst of cases the opportunity is not exploited, and the only outcome is the enrichment of the professional jargon by another word. When I began researching empowerment in the eighties, the concept's fate was not clear. In the meantime, empowerment has established a foothold for itself in the social and political discourse. As in any process of naturalization, its reception is neither uniform nor stable. There are professionals who make use of the concept in their work without committing themselves at all to its message, only to enrich their rhetoric. There are people who present empowerment as an exclusively psychological, or political, process, although its distinction lies precisely in the integration it creates between the psychological and the political. There are those who use it to moderate their radical rhetoric: empowerment makes it possible to express a sensitivity to the individual, and at the same time to aspire to transform society. The concept, then, serves diverse ideas outside the mainstream, as well as giving a new flavor to conservative liberal ideas about civil rights and *social responsibility*. The ideology of empowerment, then, interfaces with social views which have always been considered to be opposed to one another, creates bridges between them and moderates their central concepts.

Empowerment as a world-view takes its inspiration from the Existentialist philosophy, especially from Nietzsche and Albert Camus, and is close in its spirit to Martin Buber. In the realm of psychology, it has a strong affinity with the existentialistically-based humanistic psychology of Victor Frankl, Carl Rogers and Rollo May. The existential approach says that people need freedom and choice despite, and perhaps really because of, the certain knowledge that they are fated to

die. The meaning of the temporary and partial character of life is that *truths* are relative and must not be received as dogma. People's commitment to and responsibility for the world comes into being as a consequence of their development of their abilities, and not vice versa. These abilities are more than technical skills, they are a quest for meaning which stems from an awareness of our own needs and a sensitivity to the needs of others.

In the original sense of the word, empowerment is power of attorney—authorization to act on behalf of society, a kind of delegation of authority on the social and personal planes. Empowerment symbolizes energy which exists in abundance and is not taken by force; it expresses an ongoing social process, not a one-time occurrence. Some writers have made an effort to purge the concept of threatening revolutionary connotations, to present it as a claim for civil rights and as a legitimate democratic resistance to discrimination, and also to propose its implementation as a macro-social policy. At the same time, it is clear that as in any change process that takes place in power relations, in empowerment too there exists a far-from-inconsiderable potential for conflict. Empowerment seeks for a position as a natural process that is anchored in human nature and in social relations: more control over one's life and one's environment is an important component in the life of every human being, and citizens who are in control of their lives and participate in decision-making with regard to their future and their environment make an important contribution to democratic society as a whole. Hence, an empowerment policy which makes more control over one's life possible also increases societal resources – the individual profits, the societal profits, the physical environment profits, the social institutions profit – a win-win outcome in every possible sense.

Emphasizing the social benefits is an important strategic component in the ideology of empowerment, especially in order that well-off potential partners may feel comfortable and not oppose the process. It is important to make clear to all the citizens the extent to which empowerment is relevant to their lives as well, and at the same time to remember that the constant support of the middle class is essential for the success of any comprehensive social plan. Empowerment, then, is a pragmatic world-view, which aims to serve as a guiding principle for diverse democratic views.

Empowerment is a postmodern approach. As such, it is conscious of itself and of its aspirations, and does not recoil from a deconstruction and exposure of its assumptions, both as an educational action towards other approaches, and for the purposes of self-examination and self-criticism. In its view, we shape the world according to our perceptions: just as a competitive ethos creates competitive environments, and forecasts of a recession create a recession, so too people's faith in themselves and in their community – who they are, what they want to do, and how they want to live – has a much greater tendency to become realized than is customarily believed. Empowerment aspires to a legitimate position in the center of the social consensus, from where it is possible to influence the society's character, policy, and goals.

This is an endeavor to create an ethos of empowerment. Such an ethos is important and essential because it is so lacking in the social reality we live in. Societies are saturated with disempowerment—with discrimination, with prejudices, with the casting of stigmas, with blaming the victim. It is permeated with ideals which isolate and exclude individuals inside their private space, and place them in confrontation with one another—the individual's success is measured by her/his capacity to compete in a weak market, to be a winner among losers. Social practices which encourage solidarity, social integration, support of the vulnerable, compassion and empathy, are rare, and the outcome is a society of lonely individuals in the crowd.

The creation of a community is both a personal and a social solution—what it means is working as a group to grapple with problems that the individual cannot cope with alone. True, there is no guarantee that the collective effort will succeed where the individuals have failed, but the very process of collaboration, of involvement, of people's commitment to attain a shared goal, to influence the making of decisions that affect their lives, to improve the quality of their lives and their environment, creates a new feeling and new capabilities among the participants—and this is an important outcome in itself. Empowered action means coming out of the alienation, marginality and sense of irrelevance that are the lot of those who have no influence over what influences them.

The community provides its members with important needs, in ways which people who live without a sense of community are not aware of. Alienation can become an existential condition, unless a person feels that s/he belongs to a body in which there exist mutual trust and commitment to shared goals. In Israel it was customary for years to assume that the State provides a sense of belonging to all its inhabitants—by means of central institutions, mainly of education and the military, as well as by means of the egalitarian ethos it was founded upon and its urgent needs of defense and integration. This is how many of its citizens felt, and perhaps they feel the same way today, but many have remained outside this communal circle of activists. With the passage of time, the State has become more complex and has functioned less as a community, its peripheries have expanded, and there alienation and estrangement have become a central national experience. The more this marginalizing process endangers a society which is based on values of commitment and trust, the more important it becomes to discuss it. It is important to make it possible for people to feel a sense of belonging and being at home in a particular place, for only through this can one belong to a more abstract entity, such as the State or the world. Without a place of my own, where I can be myself, I cannot understand or be concerned

with the universal, nor with the welfare of others. Since the local community is the focal location through which people develop an inclusive social responsibility, community building and community development need to become a national interest, a part of the social charter between the State and its citizens.

There are people who live in a community, and for them the community is a basic fact of life. Some of them would even gladly give it up, because it oppresses their lives and their uniqueness. Others live without a community, and don't need one at all—perhaps they have attained a feeling of being at home in the world, or in their professional or ideological communities. As opposed to these, there are people among us who need a community in order to actualize themselves as involved citizens—at work, or in voluntary organizations. But there are also people who need a community to ensure their very existence. People who do not find a social solution appropriate to the problem that bothers them create communities in order to improve their quality of life and the future of their children, or in order to provide an answer to a physical limitation, or to create a space for a different way of life. These, if you like, are different degrees of the need for empowerment. The critical lack of control over their lives is that of people living in despair, poverty, discrimination, dependence. They need empowerment and the creation of a community in order to survive.

The need for belonging and meaning is felt by a decisive majority of human beings, even if it hides behind the screen of isolation, cynicism and disbelief in one's own ability to make a change. There can and should be many shades and diverse expressions to people's need to belong to a supportive and egalitarian social group. The need for empowerment, at every level of intensity, is manifested in the call to bring to life the active community that participates in the political arena as a civil right and expresses its unique voice in order to achieve its special objectives.

In this book I have set myself three tasks. The first is a survey of the origins of the concept of empowerment and the development of a theory of empowerment. The second is an understanding of the meaning of the empowering change process. The third is an outline of professional empowerment practice. In the context of the latter task, questions are asked about the principles and the ways of work of professionals who intervene in people's lives. The combination of these three tasks in the one book is intended to bring readers knowledge about empowerment and about its degree of relevance to their personal and professional lives.

I have been talking with people about empowerment for many years now, and have the impression that the concept arouses enthusiasm and even excitement among many. Empowerment is a contemporary concept, and in this lies its strength. It has captured a place in the thoughts of people in a diversity of social fields. Psychologists, social workers, teachers, planners, evaluators, organizational developers. In the world at large, the concept is widespread. As a term, empowerment contributes to the discourse on social problems, since it exposes the extent of oppression, discrimination and stigma in the lives of vulnerable populations, especially in a society with an egalitarian democratic vision.

In conversations about empowerment, reservations are expressed as well. Some people refuse to accept powerlessness as a starting-point for empowerment. For example, leaders of neighborhoods and community organizations, who are people with power, are not prepared to identify with a stigmatic description of poverty, marginality, social alienation and indifference. They explain that since they are not poor or weak themselves, the transition from powerlessness to more control over life is not relevant to their lives. It is important to emphasize here that empowerment is important to every human being, because the danger of deterioration to a constant and systemic powerlessness lurks in wait for any citizen

in the society. The danger is social, not personal, because disempowerment is entailed in social practices that can injure the life of any person: during illness and hospitalization as a patient who needs treatment and nursing; during an absorption crisis, as a new immigrant who needs the support of the social services; during the loss of a spouse, as a widow who needs financial support from the social security services. In every need for social services there exists a potential loss of power and a danger of deterioration to a permanent and destructive powerless dependence. In every intervention in a problematic social situation there potentially exist all the possibilities of professional intervention—one can disempower people and bring them down to powerlessness, or one can encourage empowerment, and develop personal and communitarian abilities. People who have control over their own lives and are not interested in recognizing the dangers of disempowerment may, unconsciously, and not because of bad intentions, disempower others. Such phenomena are known from histories of community organizations (as well as from the private lives of many *self-made* men and women). Organizations that were built through processes of empowerment may, after becoming established, disempower those who need their services.

There are people who oppose empowerment because it is too critical and radical an approach. Empowerment deals with the citizen's rights to self-definition, with people's critical awareness of their social situation, with people organizing in order to achieve important goals, with the creation of a community. There are people who interpret such social change as civic revolt. To them, it is important to make it clear that social changes will take place around us anyway, and will influence our lives. The question is only: Will we participate in what is going on in our lives, and try to influence the course of the change, or will we look on at what is happening and accept every intervention as a *force majeure*. The goal of

empowerment is to create a civic culture which recognizes the rights of people to influence that which influences their lives.

Empowerment, then, supplies a legitimation to social change efforts on the local level. The awakening of local initiatives of change has not received much academic attention since the sixties[†]. Then people spoke of resistance and of civic revolt. Although today the formulations are more moderate, more sober, the demands for equality and dignity remains as it was. In the 21st century too, the struggle for people's rights to more control over their lives and in decisions affecting their future and their environment promises gains for which it is worth risking the status quo.

There are a number of paradoxes connected to the various levels of our subject:

The first paradox has to do with the language of empowerment. A book on empowerment has to be readable, and has to transmit a clear message, free of jargon or patronizing speech. This is a big challenge, and I don't always live up to it. The principle is valid, in any case – the language of empowerment has to be appropriate to the message of empowerment – to allow the readers a control of the subject and to encourage a learning of its principles.

Another paradox has to do with *community*—a concept which in this book serves to describe the creation of diverse kinds of collective entities. On the face of it, the geographical community loses some of its importance as a consequence of this. Paradoxically, however, the creation of communities around a shared critical characteristic is also a process that is bound within boundaries of place and time. When widows create a community of their own, they need it, among other things, in order to compensate for the insensitivity, the

† Refer to the introduction to the E-Book edition.

prejudices and the indifference towards them of the *geographical communities* in which they live. The new community of women which is created in this way challenges the geographical community, and thus changes the latter as well.

Another paradox has to do with the right to choose. When someone proposes a certain fundamental approach, there is a need for an alertness to the danger of the negation of the right to oppose this approach. The beauty of empowerment is in its consciousness of the wealth and diversity that human society has been blessed with, and in its giving a legitimation to differences among people, and to people's right to be faithful to their way of life, to their thinking and their preferences, and their right to be proud of this, even when they are a minority. This book warns against influences which would make people who are different in any way powerless. It warns against the condemnation of the victim, and proposes that we recognize the social causes of personal distresses. Its goal is to enable someone who is not accepted by the community, because s/he is special and different, to establish a community of his/her own together with others in her/his condition. The book relates to the community that has a geographical base as only one of the possibilities, and emphasizes the other common characteristics upon which a community may be established. However, while empowerment calls for an avoidance of a uniform worldview that imposes itself on others, it is liable to impose itself, and thus to create a dissonance so sharp that it may turn everything empowerment calls for into a farce.

The final paradox has to do with the great love for social change that overflows this book. It is dedicated to my parents, Marek-Meir and Liliana Opatowsky, who lived three entire cycles in this world: one, as citizens possessing equal rights in enlightened Europe between the two World Wars; one as persecuted Jews in the hell of loss and death; and one as new immigrants in the State of Israel. Chaos was their life's reality. And here we are, their sons and daughters, enchanted with theories of change, enjoying thoughts about perpetual change

and about conflict, living in an environment that is stable, abundant and more secure than all the generations of Jews who preceded us in modern times. Thanks to what? Thanks to our demand for sovereignty—thanks to our struggle to control our fate. The great narrative of empowerment of this century, and perhaps in all of human history, is the story of the establishment of the state of the Jews in the Land of Israel. Although this process will not be discussed here, it is the historical context by means of which each one of us can understand the security and the dignity that the process of empowerment provides to those who take a risk and participate in it.

The book has two parts. The first part deals with the development of a theory of empowerment, and the second with the development of empowering professional practice—community planning.

In the first part, which develops a theory of empowerment, there are three chapters. The first chapter discusses theories of power, surveys the development of sociological thought about power, and presents theories of power that will serve further on to enrich the concept of empowerment and to give a deeper understanding of its processes. This chapter clarifies the sources of powerlessness and how it comes about in power relations; the importance of the organizational advantage in these relations; the place of professional knowledge in power relations. The second chapter, *Empowerment—Definitions and Meanings*, defines empowerment and situates it in the cultural context where it is particularly relevant – in Western democratic society. It analyses the principal processes of empowerment – the individual, the community, and the professional processes – and discusses the particular questions connected with each one of these. The discussion of individual empowerment considers the psychological criteria connected with the concept, the personal as political, and the group as a means for the empowerment of its members. The discussion about community empowerment clarifies the meaning of the

community in this book, introduces the groups for whom community empowerment is important in their lives, and presents different qualities of the process. Organization, as an important tool of community empowerment, is also presented here. The third part of the chapter deals with empowerment as a professional practice, and presents the values and principles, as well as professional roles and methods of intervention that have to guide professionals who enhance or encourage empowerment (henceforth, *empowering professionals*). The third chapter – *Developing a Theory of Empowerment* – deals with the quest for a theoretical method that integrates individual and social explanations, and focuses on Giddens' theory of structuration as a basis on which a contextual theory of empowerment is developed. The individual, the group, the organization, the community and power relations in the surrounding society, are presented as contextual relations that influence and are influenced by changing and dynamic circles.

The second part of the book applies the theory developed in the first part within the bounds of a particular professional practice. The fourth chapter – *Community Planning* – redefines this practice as common to a number of professions which deal with planning and intervention in the community. The fifth chapter – *Processes of Individual Empowerment in the Context of Community Planning* – discusses the process that take place in the lives of the people involved in empowering community planning, and signs that assist in the identification of the realization of these processes. The sixth chapter – *Processes of Community Empowerment in the Context of Community Planning* – discusses the principal stages in the process of community empowerment. The seventh chapter – *Community Planning as an Empowering Professional Practice* – develops the empowerment-encouraging intervention in each stage of the process of change. This chapter integrates a conventional professional process with a process of encouraging the

empowerment, into a single professional practice. This chapter presents a conceptual model of the contextual theory of empowerment, and thus constitutes an application of the book's lessons.