Building Community Power

An Introduction

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Introduction

This book is about ways that people can collectively engage with and influence the systems that affect their lives, particularly to change systems that create or maintain inequality and oppression. The collective capacity to do this can be referred to as *social* or *community power*. The group-level processes that develop these types of power and capacity can be described as *community empowerment* processes. These processes are often rooted in local neighborhoods, schools, and nonprofit and voluntary organizations. Their influence and impacts, however, can radiate well beyond their localities. Community empowerment processes can produce needed changes in societal and community systems (e.g., changes that bring about more equitable policies or practices) while simultaneously creating contexts that are beneficial for participants (e.g., settings that foster social connectedness and skill development).

Despite this great potential and many notable accomplishments, however, these processes are inherently challenging. Cultivating settings within and/or across organizations that create collectivities capable of sustained action is no easy task. Nor is contesting the interests of entrenched defenders of status quo systems. It should not be surprising that these efforts frequently fall short of achieving their ambitious goals of making policies and systems more egalitarian and restorative.

Understanding why some efforts can build, exercise, and sustain community power while others struggle to do so requires learning about distinct approaches, how these approaches operate across different contexts, and the unique strengths of challenges of different approaches. Community empowerment processes differ in many ways. Some of these differences are readily apparent and others are subtle. In some cases, we may still lack the basic vocabulary needed to make important distinctions.

Through deep examinations of numerous approaches in different contexts, the chapters in this book provide insights into what community empowerment approaches have in common and what is specific to only some. Each chapter offers a current view of interdisciplinary social research on a particular approach to building and exercising community power. The chapter authors have learned about these approaches from a variety of forms of experience,

often including direct participation and systematic inquiry (many of the authors conduct work at the research–practice interface). Each chapter provides recommendations on how the beneficial effects of the approach they are describing can be reinforced and how challenges and limitations can be navigated and mitigated. In some cases, the chapter authors also provide insights into how certain approaches can lead into, build upon, and complement each other. The overarching goal of this book is enhancing understanding so that these approaches can be pursued more strategically and studied more rigorously, to greater cumulative effect.

This introductory chapter begins by discussing a definition of empowerment that underpins the contributions in this book. The term has now been so widely used that it is necessary to be painstakingly precise about its intended meaning. The way this term is used in this book differs from what it may connote based on usage across different discourses.

After establishing a definition, I describe some of the orienting perspectives for this book. First, the book takes a holistic or "ecological" view of empowerment processes, meaning that community-level and organizational dynamics are understood to be inextricably linked to participatory behaviors and psychological dynamics. Second, within this broader ecology, this book is centered on organizational approaches, since these are what determine how micro- and macro-level dynamics in empowerment processes interface with each other. Third, despite this emphasis on organizational approaches, each chapter also examines what is understood about how learning and human development take place within the organizational settings comprised by the approach they are describing. Fourth, many chapters explicitly reference a multidimensional view of community power, with situational, institutional, and systemic dimensions. I outline each of these dimensions and how understanding them can be valuable for understanding and power dynamics. Fifth, I briefly describe an integrated understanding of this multidimensional view of community power and an ecological orientation to empowerment.

Building from this conceptual backdrop, I then describe the structure and contents of this book, which is organized into six parts, grouping chapters into categories of approaches: (1) organizing and activism, (2) participatory governance, (3) civil society and coalitions, (4) enterprise, (5) participatory and community arts, and (6) education and engaged research. This is followed by a discussion of the book's scope, a description of the common elements of each chapter, and, finally, some thoughts on different ways that readers can engage with and make use of this book.

What Does Community Empowerment Mean?

When it entered the lexicon around fifty years ago, the term "empowerment" was associated with struggles for equal rights and social

justice. As it has proliferated in various discourses, however, it has suffered from terminological confusion and crises of meaning. In a sense, the term has been coopted. Here I discuss five interrelated issues with current uses of the term: (1) broad and varied definitions, (2) individualism, (3) depoliticization, (4) confusion about roles, and (5) collaboration and conflict.[1] Examining these issues helps to clarify the meaning of the term as it is used in this book.

Broad and Varied Definitions

Definitions and implied meanings of the term "empowerment" have varied within the academic literature, but popular uses of the term have been even broader and more diverse. In advertisements, for example, the term can often be taken to mean something akin to self-confidence, self-help, or self-actualization. Those deploying the term in human services and programs often mix aspects of the term's meaning in various scholarly traditions with assumptions that pervade more popular uses (such as in marketing). In a review of the uses of the term in health promotion programs, for instance, Woodall et al. (2012) conclude that "the term [empowerment] has been used with reckless abandon, with many health promotion projects and interventions (seemingly regardless of their function) aiming to 'empower' the populations they are working with" (p. 743).

This broader colloquial usage is at odds with the orientations of the contributors to this book in many ways. A definition that succinctly locates our perspectives is that empowerment describes *processes through which people and groups take action to gain greater control over their lives and environments*. This definition is rooted in theories of empowerment developed in community psychology and related applied disciplines (Gutiérrez, 1990; Maton, 2008; Rappaport, 1981, 1987).

Individualism

This definition of empowerment involves actions by *people* and *groups*, but in many invocations of "empowerment" there is little or no discussion of groups or collective actions. Processes by which groups build and exercise social or community power clearly have psychological aspects to them.[2] Yet it is crucial to differentiate any discussion of psychological processes from the individualist orientation that is implicit in many uses of the term "empowerment." In foundational work on the concept of psychological empowerment, for instance, Zimmerman (1990) argued that it must be clearly distinguished

1 These issues are described in greater detail in chapter 3 of *Community Power and Empowerment* (Christens, 2019), which examines the historical underpinnings and evolution of the term "empowerment" in theory and in common usage.
2 Liberation and oppression are both psychopolitical (Prilleltensky, 2008).

from "individual empowerment." Instead, psychological empowerment was theorized as one aspect of what takes place within group process and contexts of collective action. The holistic understanding of empowerment – with inextricable psychological, organizational, and community processes occurring simultaneously – is reflected in the contributions to this book.

Depoliticization

Many invocations of empowerment – especially those that are overly focused on individuals to the detriment of groups and collective action – are not coherently or realistically linked to changes in community power relations. In this book, chapters describe how power is being built and exercised by and within organizations and collectivities and how these can challenge elite interests and create changes in systems. All approaches described in these chapters have at least the possibility (and in many cases the express purpose) of enacting and/or working toward forms of democratic egalitarianism and liberation from oppression. The value orientation of many of the approaches described in this book is similar to what Wright (2016) described as the three core values of social emancipation: (1) *equality/fairness*, or the goal of equal access to the conditions people need to flourish; (2) *democracy/freedom*, or the goal of equal access to the means to meaningfully participate in decision-making relevant to people's lives; and (3) *community/solidarity*, or the goal that cooperation is not motivated solely by instrumental self-interest, but also by concern for others and/or moral obligation.

Confusion about Roles

In many uses of the term "empowerment," it is implied or overtly claimed that it is something that can be done *to* someone or given to them (i.e., Person/Group A *empowered* Person/Group B). This notion is plainly at odds with the description of empowerment as processes by which people and groups take action to alter systems and power relations. Instead, empowerment processes unfold as groups endeavor to develop their own capacities and take actions to alter systems and conditions. These processes can of course be helped along in various ways by people or organizations who are not the primary actors in the effort (e.g., funders, practitioners, policymakers, adult allies of youth activists, etc.), but it is important not to conflate this with "empowering" people and groups. In some instances, during the review and revision processes, I encouraged contributors to this book to reconsider phrasing that might lead to confusion around the roles of various entities and actors. The perspective throughout this book is therefore that empowerment processes are led and carried out by those directly involved (e.g., members, residents, students), while others may help to maintain or cocreate structures and settings that are conducive to those processes and provide support in various ways.

Collaboration and Conflict

A fifth issue that has contributed to confusion around what empowerment means revolves around the extent to which these processes are understood as more collaborative or more conflictual, and whether the collaboration or conflict is taking place within groups or between groups. Some who have adopted the term "empowerment" to describe educational or prevention-focused programs, for instance, may preclude the possibility of conflict-based approaches and emphasize collaborative efforts. This constrains possibilities for altering power relations. At the other end of the spectrum, some discussions of empowerment have emphasized the need for conflict and struggle to transform the status quo. These have sometimes prompted critiques from a feminist perspective (e.g., Riger, 1993; Stall & Stoecker, 1998) that conflict is being pursued to the detriment of collaborative processes. The chapters in this book analyze approaches with a range of guiding orientations for how they navigate and decide when to prioritize collaborative or conflictual processes, both within their groups and with other community actors and organizations. The reality is that there is often a complex interplay between collaboration and conflict, so community empowerment processes must be understood to include both. In fact, a key determinant of the effectiveness of these efforts involves discernment about when conflict will be necessary and when collaborative approaches will suffice.

Orienting Perspectives for This Book

Ecological View of Empowerment Processes

In contrast to notions of "individual empowerment" discussed earlier, empowerment theory has developed with the clear intent of understanding and promoting collective action processes. Rappaport (1987), for instance, described empowerment processes from an ecological perspective, emphasizing the interdependence of people and groups. Influenced by this same perspective, Zimmerman (2000) outlined empowerment processes and outcomes at the psychological, organization, and community levels of analysis. Although empirical studies have often focused primarily on only one of these ecological (micro-, meso-, and macro-systemic) levels of analysis or another, many scholars have been clear that dynamics at each level are dependent on the others. This holistic conception of empowerment – what Simon (1994) called its "dual focus" (p. 15) on people and their environments – is part of the enduring appeal of empowerment theory.

At the macro-systemic end of the spectrum, empowerment processes involve the pursuit of systemic changes to improve community conditions and the shifts in power relations necessary to achieve these changes (e.g., Conner & Zaino, 2014; Freudenberg & Tsui, 2014; Speer et al., 2020). Viewed through

the lens of political theory, these processes can build capacities that enable democratic governance and institutions to succeed (Hendriks et al., 2020). At the micro-systemic end of the spectrum, psychological empowerment processes involve greater levels of community participation, gains in understanding of how social and political power operates within change processes, and increases in participants' perceived control in the sociopolitical domain (Ballard et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2021). These micro-level and macro-level dynamics are mediated through organizational structures and dynamics (Rothman et al., 2019).

Emphasis on Organizational Approaches

Organizations and the participatory settings that they foster are the meso-level structures where psychological (micro-level) and community (macro-level) processes interconnect. Organizations and settings are thus the lynchpins for building and exercising community power (Han, 2016; Krauss et al., 2020). Empowering community settings are those that develop capacity to address social issues, in part through cultivating the skills and leadership capacities of those who are participating (Aber et al., 2010; Maton, 2008). Settings like these exist within a variety of types of organizations, including voluntary associations, interorganizational alliances, and social movement organizations.

Empowering community settings tend to have some features in common regardless of their context or the particular approach that they are taking. For instance, *opportunity role structure* is a feature of organizational settings that has been defined as "the amount, accessibility, and arrangement of formal positions or roles within an organization that provides opportunities for members to take control of group tasks and build their skills and competencies" (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 135). Opportunity role structure appears to be one distinguishing feature of a wide variety of types of empowering community settings (Krauss et al., 2020; Maton & Salem, 1995; Powell & Peterson, 2014). Other features may vary according to particular contexts and goals. For instance, some settings orient their activities more toward mutual support/aid, while others are more focused on achieving systemic and structural changes, yet settings at both ends of this spectrum may foster empowerment processes (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006; Wilke & Speer, 2011).

Researchers have sought to understand these distinctions across various types of settings, including which features of settings are *ecological commonalities* (features like opportunity role structure that tend to be the same across many setting types) and which are *ecological specificities* (those that more likely vary based on context; Maton & Salem, 1995; Peterson & Speer, 2000). In addition, some setting features may be especially important for or differentially experienced by certain subgroups or categories of participants (Peterson & Hughey, 2002). Individual participants, moreover, typically experience a variety of types of organizational settings, and there may be

benefits for both participants and organizations to particular sequences of participatory behaviors or group-level regularities and dynamics. Although much remains unknown about the features that make civic associations and social movement organizations effective (Andrews et al., 2010), it is clear that a variety of settings and types of organizations are needed, and collaborative relationships between organizations are also key (Akiva & Robinson, 2022; Shumate & Cooper, 2022).

Attention to Learning and Human Development

The primary goal of building community power is to change systems, not the people who are affected by them. Nevertheless, involvement in community change processes often has a profound influence on people: on their relationships, their worldviews, their skills, the actions they choose to take, and their conceptions of themselves and their capabilities. As mentioned earlier, this interrelated set of developmental processes can be described as psychological empowerment. These processes are also sometimes described as civic and/or sociopolitical development (Fernández & Watts, 2023; Flanagan & Christens, 2011), especially in studies of younger people. These various frameworks for understanding how people learn and develop as they take part in social action have some broad commonalities and some notable differences in terms of their relative emphases (see Christens et al., 2016).

Sociopolitical development theory, for instance, has been deeply influenced by Freire's (1973) work on conscientization and has therefore emphasized learning and cognitive development, especially through the study of critical consciousness (Rapa & Godfrey, 2023). Critical reflection – people's ability to understand and critique their sociopolitical contexts – is the component of critical consciousness that has received the most attention in research, with a number of studies finding associations with positive developmental indicators, particularly among marginalized youth (Heberle et al., 2020). This is in part because it has been theorized as a precursor to actions intended to help bring about systemic changes (Watts et al., 2011). Scholars of critical consciousness have recently called for increased attention to actions and behaviors due to the recognition that behaviors and cognitive development have a bidirectional influence (Diemer et al., 2021).

Civic development, meanwhile, has had a stronger relative emphasis on the actions that people are taking as they engage with civic life. Research has examined the various forms that civic engagement can take in different sociopolitical contexts, in different phases of life, among people and groups with varied identities, and toward different ends and values (Sherrod et al., 2010). The conceptualization of engagement in this body of literature has tended to be broader than the notion of "critical action" that comprises the behavioral component of critical consciousness. Meanwhile, research on psychological empowerment has emphasized perceptions of agency in the sociopolitical

domain, which has often been operationalized as one's perception that they are capable of playing important roles in bringing about changes in the systems that affect their lives (Peterson et al., 2011). Research on psychological empowerment processes has been particularly attentive to settings and contexts (e.g., Rutledge, 2023), to relational development processes (Langhout et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009), and to participants' learning about how power operates in social change processes (Lardier et al., 2021; Speer et al., 2019).

Scholarship using each of these frameworks for understanding learning and development in civic/sociopolitical action is influencing those using the other frameworks, and work is continually advancing within and across them. For instance, a recent edited volume is dedicated entirely to advancing understandings of the settings and contexts that foster critical consciousness (Godfrey & Rapa, 2023). The organizational approaches that are described in this handbook depend on the types of experiential learning and leadership development processes that are captured by these psychological constructs, but again, if these processes are occurring apart from collective efforts to exert influence, change systems, and/or alter power relations, then empowerment processes are not really taking place. What is occurring might be better described instead as training or consciousness raising.

Multidimensional View of Community Power

Those who are engaged in empowerment processes are seeking to bring about changes to existing systems that are manifestations of entrenched power imbalances. They therefore frequently find themselves involved in contention with elites and other defenders of status quo power relations. Those who wield power often exercise it in multiple ways, ranging from the overt and direct, to more subtle and even hidden ways. To change unjust systems, community groups must also build and exercise power in multifaceted ways. One useful lens for understanding and describing community power dynamics is built on a three-dimensional concept of power first proposed by Lukes (2005).[3] These three dimensions of power can be labeled (1) the situational dimension, (2) the institutional dimension, and (3) the systemic dimension (Alford & Friedland, 1985). This framework has been adopted in some studies of empowerment processes (e.g., Evans & Fernandez-Burgos, 2023; Speer, 2008) and is taken up by many of the contributors to this handbook.

Situational

Community organizer Saul Alinsky (1971) argued that power can be derived from two primary sources: organized money and organized people. The overt

3 This multidimensional view of power is illustrated in Gaventa's (1980) study of an Appalachian mining town.

conflicts that emerge between competing interests in public life (often with more organized money on one side and more organized people on the other) can be understood as the situational dimension of power. Think of standoffs between management and labor unions, environmental groups opposing the construction of a new highway, or local political factions lining up on different sides of a proposed municipal policy or backing different candidates for elected offices. Which side prevails? What sorts of negotiations take place? Are concessions made by one side or the other? Building and exercising power in the situational dimension includes all of the strategic moves to try to "win" in debates over the issues that have emerged into public contestation. For groups whose main source of power is people rather than money, the fundamental practices of community organizing are indispensable (Han et al., 2021).

Institutional

One thing that this situational view leaves out is that many problems and issues never emerge into overt public contention, and power relations often determine which ones do. The institutional dimension of power refers to efforts of people and groups to prevent some things from emerging into open debate and/or cause others to. These agenda-setting efforts often take place out of public view. One example is attempting to control how information is shared or conveyed (e.g., owning journalistic outlets or seeking to shape how they cover the news). Another example is attempts to influence who is included or excluded in forums where information is exchanged or decisions are made (e.g., getting allies onto boards or other decision-making bodies). The exercise of power's institutional dimension can even involve efforts to distract from one issue by raising controversies about another. Because many of the ways that power dynamics manifest in the institutional dimension have to do with what does *not* take place, at least in full public view, this dimension of power is less easily observed and understood than dynamics that are playing out in the situational dimension, but it is crucial for understanding what emerges there.

Systemic

The systemic dimension refers to how power shapes people's perceptions of community issues, about the range of possible alternatives, and the desirability and plausibility of those alternatives. This ideological dimension of power is the most fundamental – it is determinative of what takes place in the other two dimensions. Yet it is also the least easily observed dimension of power, since it shapes conceptions of rationality (Flyvbjerg, 2002) and what is considered "natural." Understanding the systemic dimension of power can help to explain apparent contradictions that manifest across the other two dimensions, such as when people express support for systems or policies that are clearly harmful

to them. Elites are operating in the systemic dimension of power when they, for instance, seek to naturalize status quo arrangements and stoke fears about possible alternatives. Reciprocally, community organizing groups are operating in the systemic dimension of power when they deliberately resist and complicate these types of dominant narratives and craft new narratives and ways of understanding the world (Haapanen et al., 2023; Oyakawa, 2015).

Integrated Understanding of Community Power and Empowerment

An ecological model for understanding empowerment processes – with interrelated psychological, organizational, and community processes occurring simultaneously – can be understood as operating across all three of the dimensions of power described in the previous section. Table 0.1 (an adaptation of table 6.3 in Christens, 2019, p. 146) briefly summarizes some of the dynamics and processes taking place at the intersections of each of these ecological levels of empowerment and dimensions of community power.

In the situational dimension, for instance, self-perceptions of sociopolitical control are developed by participants in collective actions, which can also establish community leadership and enhance residents' sense of collective efficacy. Organizational structures are necessary to catalyze and sustain these types of activities. Those that provide participatory niches and social support that can generate a sense of connectedness (or a "sense of community") among participants are especially vital.

In the institutional dimension, participants are developing skills, including those required for bringing other residents into community action processes and encouraging their development as grassroots leaders. At a community level, this builds capacity to identify and assess problems, to develop strategies for addressing them, and to mobilize organizations and networks to influence key institutional decision-making processes. This depends on organizations and networks that can engage in organizational learning and strategize about how to influence and alter power relations.

Finally, in the systemic dimension, participants in empowerment processes engage in critical reflection that builds greater understanding of how power operates. This understanding is fostered through, for instance, collective efforts to disrupt dominant narratives and shape new public narratives (Ganz, 2011). Again, these psychological and collective capacities are developed in organizational settings with structures and dynamics that can foster critical reflection and strategy for altering public perceptions.

This model and its theoretical underpinnings are explored in greater depth in *Community Power and Empowerment* (Christens, 2019). That book, however, has only one detailed case description: in chapter 6 (pp. 144–151) I described the work of the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) – a longstanding youth organizing initiative in the US – according to this multidimensional and multilevel model of power and empowerment. I chose this case