

Materialien 3

Norbert Herriger: Empowerment in Social Work. Values, methods, implementation

1. Definition

“Empowerment aims to distribute power a little more equitably - and that... with regard to self-determination and the control of people over their own lives” (Berger/Neuhaus 1996).

“Discovering new strengths”, “activating resources”, “developing new personal and social competencies” - keywords like these refer to an action concept that has become a center piece of psychosocial work in recent years: *the empowerment concept*. Originally imported from the civil rights movement, the women’s liberation movement and community-based psychosocial work in the USA, this concept in recent years has become a constitutive element of the professional identity of social work. Empowerment describes encouraging processes of self-determination in which people in situations of powerlessness, disadvantage or social exclusion take their affairs into their own hands, become aware of their abilities, develop their own strengths and learn to use their resources to lead a self-determined life. Empowerment - in a nutshell - aims at (re-)establishing self-determination over the circumstances of one's own life. In the literature, a distinction is made between two variants of empowerment:

Political empowerment: Empowerment in the political sense of the word addresses the structurally unequal distribution of political influence and power. Empowerment describes a conflictual process of redistribution of political power, in the course of which people or groups of people leave a position of inferiority and acquire more democratic participation capacity and political decision-making power. People leave the shell of dependency and paternalism. They liberate themselves from a position of powerlessness and dependence, occupy the stage of the political public sphere and, through collective self-organization, fight for more self-determination, autonomy and control over their lives. Empowerment thus refers to a self-initiated collective process of creating political sovereignty in life. This political concept can be found above all in the context of social movements (Black Lives Matter; Fridays for Future etc.), self-help organizations and civil society projects.

Psychological empowerment: Empowerment in psychological sense describes a process in which people gain the psychological strength to successfully realize everyday management even in times of stress. This definition focuses on successful micro-politics of everyday life and addresses the ability of individuals to live their lives independently and self-organized within the texture of their everyday relationships. This psychological concept of empowerment is used above all in the reception of the empowerment concept by social work and psychosocial practice.

2. Normative framing: conception of man and basic values

Empowerment is a “value-based concept” - it is embedded in a framework of normative convictions (I have described this value framework in various publications as “the strengths model”). Summarizing the debate, we can distinguish the following basic convictions that guide the empowerment concept, its image of human beings and its methodological approach:

(1) *Resource focus:* The starting point of the empowerment concept is a critique of the traditional image of the client that guides the services and institutions of in social work. In many cases, this image of the client is still characterized by a deficit point-of-view of the client, i.e. the biographical stories of people who ask for psychosocial services are all too often perceived in categories of deficit, inability and loss of control. The consequence of this deficit view, however, is that the existing life skills of our clients, their productive resources for coping with life, are lost from view. The empowerment concept breaks away from these notions of weakness and dependency - it trusts in the talents, abilities and strengths of our clients. Its guiding principle is to (re-)confirm and strengthen those resources that make it possible for people to successfully master their lives even in critical life events and biographical stresses.

(2) *Autonomous life design and agency:* Empowerment formulates an optimistic view of human beings. Common to all empowerment ideas is the notion of people willing to fight for “a better life” for themselves and for others. The empowerment discourse thus takes up ideas and arguments that are linked to the term “agency” in current debate. Agency can be understood here as the subjective experience of “powerfulness”, which enables actors to deal successfully with social challenges, conflicts and stressful life situations and to realize their personal agenda. Agency thus characterizes people as actors who are capable of taking action and shaping their own lives, who are able, even in structures of social inequality, to deal with power-determined constraints, and to construct a self-determined and autonomous way of living.

(3) *Advocacy for self-determination and social justice:* A final basic value addresses the political horizons of the empowerment concept: People have a right to idiosyncrasy, difference and diversity. They have the right to assert and live this autonomy (where it does not endanger and violate the freedom of others) even against the mainstream of social standards of normality. In this sense, empowerment is based on the belief in the inalienable right of the addressees to self-determination. This concept is also committed to a conscience raising perspective. The aim is to give people a critical awareness of the weaving patterns of the socially unequal distribution of life goods and social opportunities, to consolidate their

analytical knowledge of these seemingly overpowering structures and to encourage social action both in the micro-social cosmos of their everyday reality and in the macro-social cosmos of political self-advocacy.

3. “Sharing Power”: The sensitive use of expert power

A psychosocial practice that follows these basic convictions takes leave of expert power. In other words: Trust in people's self-determination and their sovereignty in life always means renouncing premature expert judgements about the standards of 'right living', it means a sensitive limitation of power in counselling and therapy. Empowerment advocates a significant change in the balance of power in the helping relationship (“sharing power”). The expert judgement (i.e. the professional position of “knowing for sure what the client needs”) is increasingly being replaced by the open and power-equal negotiation of life perspectives. Although patterns of structural power are inextricably embedded in the institutional relationship in social work - the goal of a new professionalism is the construction of a (largely) symmetrical working relationship between client and counselor (“cooperation at eye level”), which dispenses with the attributes of patronizing caretaking and engages in a relationship mode of negotiating in partnership.

4. Methods: empowering instruments

Methods on the level of individual resource strengthening: The focus of methodological attention here - at the level of individual case management - is the promotion of resources. The social support aims to expand the resource budgets of the addressees. Various methods of resource-strengthening social work are used here:

- *Motivational interviewing:* a form of interviewing that is intended to ignite a “motivational spark” to change an existing stressful life situation, especially in discouraged clients.
- *Resource diagnostics:* the precise diagnosis of the available and supportable (personal and social) resources of those seeking advice.
- *Resource-oriented counseling and strength-oriented case management:* the expansion of the resource competence of clients and the systematic linking of the support resources of different providers through methods of support management.
- *Biography work:* the biographical dialogue; its intention is to rediscover and to reactivate clients' coping resources that have been buried in their histories.

Methods on the level of collective empowerment: At the level of community and political sphere, empowerment aims at mobilizing collective resources of shaping the socio-ecological environment. Empowerment means here: encouraging and enabling people in local settings to raise their voices, to articulate their interests and needs and to bundle their collective strengths to shape livable living conditions. Empowerment on community level aims at the establishment and strengthening of support networks in which people with similar concerns experience solidarity and civic engagement and become assets of a contentious public (networking within the community; promotion of self-help and civic self-organization; partisan cooperation with local social movements).

5. Empowered Organizations: empowerment in social service institutions

The implementation of a sustainable empowerment practice in services and institutions of Social Work requires a new corporate culture that translates the principles of resource-strengthening work into the structural weaving patterns of the institution and into the everyday work of the employees. Corporate management research adapted the empowerment concept as early as the 1990s. In change management theory, two different approaches to empowerment are often contrasted: *individual empowerment* and *structural empowerment*. While individual empowerment follows a micro-perspective and takes account of the perceptions, attitudes and motivations of employees, structural empowerment in a macro-perspective focuses on the institutional management culture, the hierarchical structures of decision-making power and responsibility and open spaces for employee participation.

Individual empowerment: The focus here is on the subjective perception of empowering working conditions by the employees - do the employees experience their everyday work as open for own decisions with regard to case-related decisions, choice of methodological instruments, self-evaluation, do they experience recognition and reinforcement from the upper level of management, do they perceive themselves as part of an organizational culture shared by all etc.? Individual empowerment consists of four perceptions:

- the feeling of commitment, significance and motivational meaning
- the perception of professional competence
- the experience of self-efficacy as well as
- the feeling of creative influence.

Structural empowerment: Empowerment in a structural sense aims at delegating decision-making power and responsibility from the management level to lower hierarchical levels - a reduction of hierarchical differences, which ensures a sustainable democratization of corporate structures and promotes participation and the experience of a jointly supported "corporate philosophy". The following framework conditions enable structural empowerment:

- flat hierarchies and long-ranging autonomy in decision-making
- the open access to relevant knowledge
- the availability of support services (collegial counselling/supervision)
- the access to adequate resources (time/funds) and
- the opportunity to build and use personal networks.

Successful empowerment is in reach wherever individual team members, with their specific motivations, ideas and talents, join together to form a collective that thinks and acts in unison.

With breaking down classic hierarchies and old structures and, above all, strengthening social competences among colleagues and towards clients, empowerment creates a basis for sustainable performance motivation.

6. Implementation: the Empowerment Circle

One instrument that has proven its worth in the context of team counselling and organizational development is the “empowerment circle”. Empowerment circles are cross-functional working groups (or the entire team) that develop proposals for changing the institutional mission statement and corporate identity, methodological profile and collegial communication structures and support their implementation. Topics of the empowerment circle include:

The development of a resource-centered corporate identity: The implementation of empowerment changes “the face” of the institution - internally: in the self-perception of the staff as well as externally: in the perception by funding agencies and cooperating services. As a consequence, it is often necessary to reformulate the institution's mission statement and to anchor the “empowerment philosophy” (resource focus) in the institution's self-description: the paradigm shift from the deficit to a resource perspective; agreement on the introduction of new, resource-strengthening methodologies and quality standards.

A participatory decision-making structure: A central principle of structural empowerment is the de-hierarchization of institutional decision-making, control and responsibility structures: the delegation of decision-making powers and flat hierarchies (“participative management”; “agile organization”; “new work”); the replacement of vertical hierarchies by self-directed teams; a transparent distribution of competences and responsibilities.

Transparency of information and decisions: De-hierarchized structures thrive on the transparency of input information, procedures, decisions and organizational planning for all staff; the reduction of hierarchical information and communication; an information network in which staff experience themselves as ‘stake holders’ of the organization.

The development of the methodological toolbox: Empowerment often requires a supplementary qualification of the staff and the introduction of new resource-oriented methods (“learning organization”): the introduction of instruments of resource diagnostics; the development and enhancement of methods of strength-oriented case management and personal future planning; multi-perspective case discussions in the team; further employee education and training and conceptual counselling.

The introduction of (self-)evaluation procedures: Empowerment practice should be accompanied by a continuous (self-)evaluation of the quality of structures, processes and products: the use of regular user and staff surveys as an instrument of goal-oriented work optimization; the joint definition of benchmarks for the success of professional action, and the documentation of these successes in the institution's own reporting.

Empowerment circles change the organizational culture and team quality. They are antidotes to the persistence of traditional professional routines, they strengthen commitment and motivation for change, and provide a guideline for institution's change of direction towards empowerment.

7. Conclusion

Empowerment–guided processes leave psychological and political traces: On the one hand, empowerment strengthens the self-confidence and social identity of the clients. Where the addressees can experience self-efficacy, autonomy and creative power, their psychological powers expand – they strengthen their personal resources, they create self-esteem and gain a new confidence in their own coping abilities. On the other hand, empowerment also strengthens people's role as political citizens – it strengthens the participation of citizens in often controversial processes of political decision-making, it supports their advocacy for “common goods” and thus increases their productive capital of civil society competence.

Literature

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