Value and Perspective: Empowerment

Concept
Power is the capacity of individuals/groups to act on their own behalf, to bring about change, and to control their destiny. Empowerment is the state of having power. Empowerment implies a transformation of one’s definition-of-self as having power. Empowerment is a process more than product, e.g., show how to fish than to give them a fish. During the empowerment process, the personal is expanded to the interpersonal and then to the political. Empowerment is becoming more important as political and economic power is becoming more concentrated worldwide in recent years.

Principles of Empowerment
- People must empower themselves, but we can guide them
- Empowerment implies that the disempowered have the competence and capacity to express themselves and their experiences and to know how to make choices that are in their best interest.
- Empowerment implies that the change agent and client are egalitarian partners. This is in contrast with many traditional concepts of helping, authoritarianism, or paternalism. For example, clients bring in expertise and an understanding about community conditions, problems, and needs. This expertise should be viewed as being as important as the expertise that human service professionals have about how to solve community problems.
- Focusing on needs disempowers, focusing on strengths empowers
- Empowerment recognizes all forms of inequity/oppression and respects diversity
- Collective empowerment is more powerful than individual empowerment because empowered individuals often abandon the group thus disempowering the group even more. Group empowerment leads to individual empowerment, rarely vice versa.
- It is hard to remedy collective inequity with individual empowerment
- Empowerment implies self-determination, options, choices, access to resources, and involvement in decisions that affects one’s life. In organizations, empowered workers as well as empowered clients participate in management decision making. An organization interested in empowering clients has client representatives and client advocates on its boards and key decision-making bodies.
- Arnstein suggested developed an empowerment scale: (low) manipulation, therapy, informing/training/educating, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, consumer/citizen control (high)

Issues
- Empowerment makes organizations and processes more effective; however, empowerment may make systems less efficient and accountable. Empowerment, like democracy, can be messy with conflicts, disorganization, and uneven performance.
- Empowerment requires a commitment of time and resources throughout the system.
- Often funding sources do not have empowerment as one of their values, thus an empowerment approach may jeopardize funding.
- Not all empowerment can be a win/win with both sides gaining more power. Sometimes one side loses power as the other side gains power. Thus, empowerment can foster conflict.

References

UTA School of Social Work, Community and Administrative Practice, Dr. Schoech 17-Jan-06