



Empowerment Gone Bad: Communicative Consequences of Power Transfers

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Abstract

Empowerment as a positively connoted concept has been studied extensively in applied research in different fields. Yet its unfavorable, paradoxical character has so far not received enough theoretical attention to make it possible to improve empowerment efforts. In this theoretically informed analysis of the processes that lead to the paradox of empowerment, the author argues that it evolves from discrepancies between approaching empowerment from a structural versus a communicative viewpoint: empowerees' agency might be increased on a structural level but simultaneously decreased on a communicative level, leaving them feeling *disempowered*.

Keywords

empowerment, disempowerment, paradox, reciprocity, paternalism, agency

The aim of empowerment is to improve people's lives by transferring power resources. Transferring power may entail structural changes, for instance in terms of education and employment opportunities, health care, or housing. People can also be empowered by more social-psychological changes in terms of a sense of belonging and support (e.g., through friendship networks), inspiring work environments, or recognition of identities, character traits, performances, and achievements. Generally, transferring power resources will provide the receiver with more agential options, leading to a greater sense of control and self-efficacy. As has been shown, a greater sense of control can, in turn, have a substantial impact on life satisfaction and health (see, e.g., McFarland, Wagner, and Marklin 2016; Ross and Mirowsky 2013).

As a discipline concerned with the causes and consequences of power divides between micro and macro, individual and structure, the powerless and the powerful, sociology integrates topics and fields that are highly interested in *applied* empowerment research: studies on the emancipation and participation of women, migrants, and ethnic groups (Collins 2000; Logan, Darrah, and Oh 2012; Röder and Mühlau 2014), social work (Lee 2013), community psychology (Maton 2008), and queer studies (Mayberry 2013). Furthermore, fields such as development aid (Botchway 2001), health care, nursing, counseling and mentoring (Johnson 2011; Kettunen, Poskiparta, and Liimatainen 2001), as well as workplace-related fields such as human resource

management, development, and leadership (Simons 2008; Spence Laschinger, Finegan and Shamian 2001), to name but a few, frequently make use of the empowerment concept.

However, despite its good reputation, research has shown repeatedly that empowerment can have paradoxical effects (Botchway 2001; Danso 2009; Fraser 1989; Gruber and Trickett 1987; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998; Kettunen et al. 2001; Labonte 1994; Lindner 2006; Pease 2002; Rappaport 1981): although researchers agree that empowerment is opposed to powerlessness (see Johnson 2011), it is well known in respective fields that empowerment efforts often lead to an empoweree feeling indignation and resentment rather than empowerment. A variety of problematic issues has been subsumed under the notion of the *paradox of empowerment*, but so far the paradox lacks scrutiny from a theoretical point of view.

In fact, although empowerment is a well-known and well-applied concept in most fields in which sociologists engage, surprisingly little *theoretical* attention has been received from sociologists. Admittedly, compared with theoretical work on other normative concepts, such as participation,

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care, and tolerance, theoretical reflections on empowerment are quite scarce even from other disciplines (but see, e.g., Hur 2006; Lee and Koh 2001; Pease 2002; Spreitzer 2008). However, considering that this gap in theoretical empowerment research has caused substantial dissatisfaction (Aujoulat, d'Hoore, and Deccache 2007; Lee and Koh 2001; Ward and Mullender 1991; Zimmerman 1990), a more general, overarching, sociological point of view might contribute some missing pieces in empowerment theory.

The aim of this article is to investigate paradoxical empowerment from a sociological point of view. A theoretical analysis of three power-related preconditions sets the stage for an investigation of three communicative consequences of empowerment efforts that, I argue, help illuminate the paradoxical character of empowerment. Mapping out these communicative consequences of power transfers frames new knowledge on empowerment processes that might inspire more research on empowerment as well as new ways of thinking for practitioners.

Communicative versus Structural Views on Empowerment

The concept empowerment is often used in concrete situations in which empowerment as a policy measure or technique is well known and relates to a set of specific actions (e.g., in workplace contexts). However, *empowerment* is also used as an umbrella term for all sorts of help and positive change in people's lives, without necessarily defining what exactly is meant by empowerment (e.g., this is the case in much of the literature on women's empowerment [see, e.g., Duflo 2012] and sexual empowerment [see Gill 2012]).

The applicability and wide use of empowerment is probably due to its "simple" inherent meaning; to be empowered seems desirable in all kinds of contexts and for all kinds of people. As the term itself indicates, an act of *empowerment* refers to a *transfer* of power to an agent; the term would cease to make sense semantically if the notion of a transfer were ignored. As Pease (2002) pointed out, campaigns aiming at promoting empowerment in social contexts usually focus on the redistribution of power. He defined empowerment as "a quantifiable increase in the amount of power possessed by an individual or a group" (p. 137). Such "power" can be gained by an increase of, for instance, rights, knowledge, money, or goods.

Considering the transactional aspect of empowerment, it is important to distinguish two different types of empowerment: empowerment as "life/performance enhancement" can be found in workplace contexts, counseling, social work, community psychology, and so on, and usually involves a party A who wants to empower *someone else*—party B. In contrast, empowerment as "grassroots/social movement" is either set in motion by people C to empower the same people C through *self-empowerment* or via people/organization D. Thus, although social empowerment movements are driven

from *within* (and are, so to speak, bottom up), life-enhancing empowerment is driven from the *outside* (top down). This distinction is important because of the transfer relationship between sender and receiver: in the bottom-up, social-movements type of empowerment, the empowerer and the empoweree are more or less the same unit C and, thus, do not experience the same interactional situation as between an empowerer A who wants to empower an empoweree B. It is the *dyadic empowerment relationship* between A and B in the context of life/performance enhancement that I focus on here. Typically, the paradox of empowerment is found here.

Research on life/performance-enhancing empowerment interactions commonly focuses on the *structural* facts of the empowering power transfer: What exactly is being or could or should be transferred to achieve a certain goal? Is the transfer successful? Does the transfer have the desired outcome? How could the transfer be made more efficient? and so on. Such questions deal with undoubtedly important issues, especially when seen from a purely economic or transactional viewpoint, from which a transfer of power is nothing more than redistribution. Empowerment can then be interpreted as an abstract event, just like the simultaneous change in the balances of an employer's and an employee's bank accounts.

What this view of empowerment does not consider, however, is that first, just like any other interactive situation, the transfer of power to empower does not occur in a social vacuum. Second, to empower means to *communicate* empowerment and therewith engage in communicative interaction that needs to be adjusted to the respective interactants with the necessary skills to engage in this communicative interaction. Thus, to fill the communicative/interactive gap in empowerment theorizing and to contribute new insights, I approach empowerment not from a structural but from a more contextualized, communicative point of view.

Working with a communicative approach, known from social-psychological theories of communicative interaction, means, first, to analyze interaction in terms of the situation rather than the individual and more concretely, from the "dynamics of situations" (see Collins 2004:4). Thus, my analysis focuses on the interactional situation rather than individuals' idiosyncrasies. Second, focusing on *dynamic* situations implies more than a static or one-way action: I assume that all social actions (intentional and some unintentional ones) always involve a *transfer* of communicative meanings. Such communicative meanings are "added" or "given" to the interaction by directly concerned interaction partners as well as observing third parties (Clark 1996; Goffman 1981; Sacks 1992a, 1992b): Communicative interaction can, thus, not be seen as a predefined path but rather as a series of reactions and responses that are based on the interpretation of preceding messages and meanings (see Erickson 2004:166–67). For interactants to base their responses and reactions on the communicative meanings they ascribe the preceding interactions, they need to share the same basic understanding of the world to decode one

another's messages. Luckmann (2008) referred to a "social stock of knowledge":

The meaning of individual action is, of course, subjective, but most of it is derived from social stocks of knowledge. Of course, social stocks of knowledge do not arise from nothing; they are built up in long chains of communicative social interaction that consists of coordinated, synchronized individual action. Individual action, in its turn, presupposes intentional activities whose meaning is essentially derived from social stocks of knowledge. (p. 281)

For communicative interaction to be effective, it is essential that interactants share roughly the same social stock of knowledge. For instance, whether someone experiences an offer of money as generous or insulting depends to a great extent on the social stock of knowledge on the basis of which a person ascribes the giver's action the "correct" communicative meaning. The receiver's response to the offer plays a vital part in determining the exact meaning of the offer as well as its success or failure (on this example, see Zelizer 2000).

Likewise, the act of empowerment, a social interaction just like any other, needs to be ascribed the correct communicative meaning by all involved parties to be successful. All parties have to share an understanding of what is about to happen. That is, they share the same social stock of knowledge: the empoweree understands the empowerer's intention to empower and *chooses* to accept this initiative (see Reich 2011). For such an interaction to be understood correctly, several context-dependent communicative meanings must be analyzed and decoded by the empoweree, such as the manner in which the intention of empowerment is communicated; how and by whom the relevant power resource will be defined; the nature and value of the relevant power resource; possible conditions the empoweree must comply with to actually receive the resource; the social roles of empowerer and empoweree, including past facets of their relationship; and so on (see Clark 1996). These kinds of questions, their interpretations, and the comprehension of their underlying meanings are the subject of the following analysis, for which I make use of a communicative approach, focusing on the main constituent of empowerment: power.

Three Assumptions on Transferable Power

Because empowerment denotes the process of transferring power, theorizing the concept needs to include a discussion of power. The way in which I make use of some of the existing theoretical assumptions on power is rather eclectic, and their discussion does not claim to do justice to the large variety of complex and controversial views, beliefs, and approaches to the concept and its various discourses. Yet this somewhat unconventional approach of bringing together aspects of very different views on power appears to me the most fruitful way of contributing to a more detailed understanding of empowerment.

I consider the following three assumptions from sociological theories of power as particularly useful for analyzing underlying characteristics of power transfers: power as a resource, power limits agency, and power is zero sum.

Power as a Resource

The first assumption concerning power and the possibility of transferring it regards the thought that whatever is supposed to be transferred needs to be able to be "owned" (possessed or had). This excludes the possibility of power's solely being instantaneous; it needs to be collectable. This idea of power being a resource that can be accumulated is particularly common in contexts involving political, economic, or organizational leaders, authorities, and elites (Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle 2012; Skowronek 2009) and can be traced back to early thinkers such as Hobbes ([1651] 2008) and Smith ([1776] 1970). Sociologist Max Weber ([1922] 1978) took up on the idea and defined power in *Economy and Society* as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (p. 53).

Whereas the pluralist or behavioral view (Dahl 1957; Polsby 1963) as well as the (neo)elitist view (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; to a certain extent also Lukes 2005) on power focus on the actual *exertion* of power (see Korpi 1985; Lukes 2005) I consider the notion of "probability" the key element of Weber's definition: I argue that the probability of using power needs to be distinguished from the actual exertion of power, because the probability precedes the exertion and therewith constitutes a necessary condition for power exertion. Considering that "probability" was translated from the original German word *Chance* (Weber [1922] 1980:28), which can also be translated to "opportunity," it becomes even clearer that power, according to Weber, seems to be something that can be *had* without necessarily being *used*: power can be accumulated, exchanged, appropriated, and lost.

Thus, as stated by advocates of the power resources approach, power can be seen as having a dispositional property (Korpi 1985:33): the *capacity* or ability to accumulate resources and rights and therewith increase an individual's agential options. Once such resources and rights have been collected, an actor may choose to either use or not use those resources and rights; that is, the increase of power itself does not determine the individual's future actions.

Power Limits Agency

The second assumption follows from the first: if power can be accumulated, some will accumulate more than others, providing them with an advantage over the less powerful. I argue that what the less powerful party is deprived of in interaction with the powerful counterpart is *agency*. The loss of agency because of powerful individuals or organizations is relevant in a variety of situations. Its relevance becomes

particularly obvious in the context of social work, as for example Ney, Stoltz, and Maloney (2011) highlighted, as well as in situations of conflict between organizations and communities or individuals (see, e.g., Carroll et al. 2006).

In contrast to the first assumption on power, the idea of power limiting the less powerful party's agency has been established by the power conflict tradition. Part of Weber's definition is the term *resistance* (Weber [1922] 1978:53). Weber himself never argued explicitly that resistance constitutes an imperative element of power (see Korpi 1985:41), but he observed the *possibility* that any target person of a potential power exertion might try to resist the "will" (Weber [1922] 1978:53) of the powerful party. Although it might seem as if the target person actually could prevent a power exertion through resistance, it should be irrelevant, in principle, whether the target person tries to resist or not; the mere opportunity to exert power usually secures one and the same outcome in favour of the powerful party. If the target person chooses to obey, overriding resistance will not be necessary; and in case the target person chooses to struggle, the powerful party has a reasonable chance of winning the struggle (see Weber [1922] 1978:chap. 1). Considering the dilemma of either not resisting or resisting and being overruled in any case, we may say that the powerful person A's (opportunity to exert) power *limits* the target person B's *agency*, that is, B no longer experiences himself or herself as having the capacity to *effectively* act as an agent (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Fuchs 2001; Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

In other words, (the opportunity of) exerting power over B means for B to lose agential options and for A to have a realistic chance of influencing B stronger than B can influence himself or herself. As Giddens (1984) put it, "An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to 'make a difference,' that is, to exercise some sort of power" (p. 14). Thinking of power as a resource that can be used to influence and make a difference translates then, I argue, to power equaling agential options. Whichever party has more agential options is more powerful.

I regard the problem of limited agency the most central conflict in any power relation and argue that it appears in manifest as well as latent forms. Whenever an individual does not consider the deprivation of agency to be the result of a legitimate exertion of power, manifest conflicts might ensue. At the same time, individuals might not always be aware of certain limitations to their agency, because of an unquestioned obedience to seemingly legitimate claims—and might, therefore, not resist. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that B might not actively resist A's power, the latent conflict "which consists in a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the *real interests* of those they exclude" (Lukes 2005:28, italics in original) still leads to the loss of agential options. In Dahl's (1957) well-known words, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (p. 202–203).

Power Is Zero Sum

The third, and most complex, assumption on the transferability of power concerns quantity issues and the question whether to approach power as total or relative in amount: will a transfer of power leave the sender with less power than before or not? I argue here for a view on power that supports the zero-sum idea, which has engaged theoreticians from different fields, either as more or less explicit aspects of their theories on power (see, e.g., Blau [1964] 2008; Dahl 1957; Emerson 1976; Homans 1958; Mills 1956; Polsby 1963), or in form of criticism and advocating of power as variable sum instead (see Giddens 1984; Parsons 1957, 1963).

Borrowed from game theory, the concepts of zero and variable sum represent different forms of approaching total and relative power, but the point of departure for both forms is the same, pluralist, assumption: although Weber argued that only people in high positions are in the possession of power and therewith the capability to use this power to dominate people in lower positions (Weber [1922] 1978:53ff), pluralists generally assume that *all* people have, more or less, power, as all people are in the possession of some kind of resources that can be considered desirable by different individuals or groups (Emerson 1962). Bacharach and Lawler (1981) summarized that on the basis of the assumption that all individuals do have some sort of power, zero-sum approaches "focus on *relative* power and assume constant *total* power" (p. 221, italics in original). That is, within the finite limits of total power, "increase in one party's power, by definition, implies a decrease in the other's power." Variable sum, in contrast, "recognizes that total as well as relative power may vary" (Bacharach and Lawler 1981:221).

Applied to empowerment and a transfer of power from A to B, the balance of A's and B's power according to a zero-sum approach would imply that no matter how much power A and B had before the transfer of power, A loses power in a transfer while B gains power from the transfer. A's and B's power taken together does not, neither before nor after the transfer, exceed a constant level of total power. Assuming, instead, a variable-sum approach, A might transfer power resources to B and therewith raise B's power. However, such a transfer would not necessarily mean a decrease of A's power. In fact, as a variable-sum approach "treats the relationship between the two parties' power (dependence) as an empirical question" (Bacharach and Lawler 1981:221), it is not possible to say in advance whether A's power might decrease, stay the same or increase (e.g., through future results of synergies and win-win situations due to the power transfer). In case of an increase, though, A and B's power taken together *could* exceed the total amount of power before the transfer.

Although the zero-sum approach has been subjected to a lot of criticism (see, e.g., Parsons 1957 and 1963 as one of the strongest sociological opponents of the concept), I argue that conflicts over transfers of power would not be necessary

if senders did not experience such transfers as limiting their own power resources and agential options, as argued by previous research (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Henderson 2003; Kizilos 1990).

Seen from a *micro*-oriented view, the act of a power transfer supports the zero-sum idea. Parsons's (1963) model example of a monetary transfer where zero sum according to him does not apply is "credit-creation through commercial banking" (pp. 251ff). In a situation in which the depositor of money still is considered owner of the money while the bank profits from loaning it to other people, it seems reasonable to focus on the win-win situation of "the same dollars [doing] 'double duty'" (p. 251). However, when thin-slicing this case of seemingly obvious variable sum, it is difficult to argue that the depositor does not in any way lose agential options.

After having deposited the money at the bank, the depositor might, legally, still be in possession of the money. Yet the depositor's agential options are limited insofar as the responsibility for the money has shifted to the bank: the depositor is no longer able to exert full control over the money and transfers agential options in the form of confidence and trust.

A breach of this psychological contract by the bank could possibly leave the depositor with even less agential options. Thus, even if a transfer of resources from A to B might lead to a win-win situation further on, increasing both, A's and B's agential options in terms of material means, A will have to make certain "sacrifices," no matter how small, to achieve this increase in power.

This sacrifice or cost is what makes the issue of empowerment a complex communicative undertaking. Although A might, in fact, consider the cost rather small, it can be downplayed as well as emphasized on demand: it might suit to downplay the cost when trying to conceal one's own interest and to emphasize the cost when bargaining. As Labonte (1994) put it in the context of health promotion, "power exists dialectically as an aspect of social relations, rather than as a commodity" (p. 261; see also Schuftan 1996; Woodall, Warwick-Booth, and Cross 2012). As will be elaborated on in later parts of this article, empowerment differs from concepts such as trade and bargaining as well as exchange and gift giving in so far as it implies a transfer of power primarily benefitting the empoweree. However, and following the logic of zero sum, as the giving of resources appears to leave A with less than before, empowerment provokes the question of what the empowerer gains by empowering, a question that will be shown to lie at the heart of paradoxical empowerment.

In terms of the communicative approach, these three assumptions set the stage for empowerment interactions: for any empowerment process to succeed, all interactants must be aware of the fact that power can be had to a greater or lesser extent, and they also need to be able to assess their own positions in terms of power and agential options. Furthermore, both sender and receiver involved in the power transfer must be aware of the fact that more power means

more agential options, over the other and at their expense: A's *opportunity* to exert power, as well as an *actual* exertion of power, limits B's agential options. If power is being transferred from A to B, A will have to incur a loss, albeit small, of agential options. Especially the assumption of power limiting agential options might explain the frequent perception of power *exertion* in social interactions as intrinsically negative (see, e.g., Parsons 1957:141), as well as the opposite assumption: the *sharing* of power between a powerful and a less powerful party—empowerment—is often portrayed as intrinsically positive (Rappaport 1987). However, as mentioned earlier, even the sharing of power by means of empowerment can be observed to be effectively *disempowering* (Argyris 1998; Botchway 2001; Frey 1993; Manville and Ober 2003; Rothstein 1995; Rowlands 1995).

Three Communicative Consequences of Power Transfers

The further analysis of empowerment by means of a communicative approach points to three communicative consequences of supposedly empowering power transfers that can explain when, how, and why empowerment might turn into disempowerment, creating a paradoxical situation: power differentials, reciprocity, and paternalism.

Power Differentials in Empowerment Interactions

The first communicative consequence of a power transfer might seem trivial yet can have considerable impact on empowerment interactions. For an empowerer A to be able to empower an empoweree B, A needs to have resources B does not have. Although differences in agential options between actors certainly are omnipresent in social interactions (Harris 2003; Lukes 2005), it is not realistic to assume that empowerment could be an option in all such interactions. A power differential between A and B is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for empowerment; rather, empowerment is possible only in situations in which there is a *significantly high* power differential between the two involved parties. Consider the following example: It would seem awkward if a high school's headmaster announced an intention to empower another high school's headmaster. Yet it would sound reasonable for that same headmaster to announce the empowerment of the school's teachers. The difference between these two situations is a fairly insignificant power differential between two high school headmasters and a rather significant power differential between a headmaster and the school's teachers (on teacher empowerment see, e.g., Lee and Nie 2014).

The power differential has complicated and important communicative consequences for the empowerer-empoweree relationship. Because of the high power differential between empowerer and empoweree, it is structurally unavoidable for the two parties to perceive the

resource differently. Whereas the empoweree might perceive a power-relevant resource as large, the empowerer might perceive the same resource as small. Although not problematic in transactional terms (in which a transaction involving a recipient that values the resource significantly higher than its giver does can be regarded as very successful for both parts), the communicative approach reveals underlying problems with this kind of high power differential. No matter whether empowerer A and empoweree B already are aware of an existing power differential, the empowerer will always underscore the high power differential, simply by offering to empower the less powerful party B. In fact, A might, more or less consciously, emphasize who the more powerful person is (see Eylon 1998) while at the same time portraying B as needy and inferior (Pease 2002). Even worse, in case third parties observe the power transfer, B might have reason to worry about a damaged reputation and appearing less knowledgeable and/or resourceful.

Thus, where structural approaches focus on the power transfer per se, a communicative approach reveals underlying assumptions, ascriptions, and indirect messages sent between empowerer, empoweree, and possibly third parties. In case of this first aspect, these assumptions, ascriptions, and messages deal with the empowerer's performance and communication of superiority, independently of how unaware or unintentional these messages might be.

Reciprocating Empowerment

Following from the previously discussed assumptions on transferable power (resource and zero sum), applying a structural approach to a transfer of power would mean to suggest that although one party gains agential options, this always involves a loss in agential options for the other party. This should, then, also be true for empowerment. Yet unlike concepts such as trade and bargaining or exchanges and gift giving, empowerment might be communicated as a rather selfless act: the only party that *profits* from a power transaction seems to be the empoweree. The empowerer, in contrast, gives up resources, loses agential options, and, as a consequence, is not seldom portrayed (or portrays himself or herself) as an altruistic or philanthropic benefactor (Rothstein 1995). From a structural point of view, this argumentation makes sense and is, in fact, unavoidable, for as soon as the empowerer communicated expectations of reciprocation, the situation would have to be reframed (as trade, bargaining, exchange, or gift giving) and therewith not as an act of empowerment.

From a communicative viewpoint, however, this reduction of empowerment to one single zero-sum game involving only *one* transfer of resources, is not quite sufficient. As argued above, empowerment should be regarded as any other interactive situation, that is, abundant with socially, culturally, and situationally specific communicative meanings. Christens (2012) expressed this when arguing that

empowerment efforts include "reciprocal transactions that occur as people exercise agency in and through relationships in different community and organizational settings" (p. 124).

Considering the communicative level, empowerment seems to be quite a unique form of resource transfer, one that does not *seem* to require reciprocation. However, anthropologists (e.g., Bliege Bird and Bird 1997; Firth 1967; Sahlins 1972) as well as sociologists (Becker 1956; Blau [1964] 2008; Gouldner 1960; Homans 1958; Simmel [1908] 1950) have established that cultures usually have norms of equality in regard to symbolic meanings of exchange relationships and that many social interactions are guided by norms of reciprocity. Social exchange theory is based on the assumption "that a resource will continue to flow only if there is a valued return contingent upon it" (Emerson 1976:359). As is the case with most social norms, individuals, no matter how powerful, cannot simply override the "moral code" (Ekeh 1974:58) of reciprocity expectations by giving away resources and implying or declaring that they do not expect anything in return. Although it might indeed be the empowerer's true and pure goodwill that lies behind an action, the empoweree will still be influenced by normative ideas concerning expectations and probably struggle with simply accepting the one-sidedness of the transfer. Whether the involved parties like it or not, "implicit reciprocity expectations" (Shore, Toyokawa, and Anderson 2008:26) will accompany any such situation.

According to Simmel and Mauss, society provides two mechanisms for coping with the problem of reciprocity in social situations in which a transfer of valuable resources cannot be returned on equal terms: the giver of the resources can either frame the transfer as a *gift*—and might expect a gift in return in the foreseeable future. Or the giver communicates that *gratitude* on the side of the receiver will suffice to reciprocate (Simmel [1908] 1950:389ff; Mauss 1990). Although Simmel ([1908] 1950:387) saw "equivalence" as the basis of human social life and gratitude as one mechanism to deal with momentary inequality, he still underlined that gratitude "is realized in a different coin, as it were, and thus injects something of the character of purchase into the exchange, which is inappropriate in principle" (p. 391). Both Simmel and Mauss described a gift's binding character and how it not only limits the recipient's freedom but also creates inferiority (Mauss 1990:65).

In the context of empowerment, neither of these two mechanisms is practicable for the empoweree: the aforementioned, necessarily hierarchical, relation between the powerful party A and the less powerful party B renders adequate reciprocation in form of a future gift by B essentially impossible (cf. Sennett 1993:52ff) as well as inconsistent with the basic idea of empowerment. Thus, the only option left for the empoweree is, following Simmel and Mauss, to be *grateful*. Although this might seem to be a legitimate option from a structural viewpoint, the communicative approach reveals that the empoweree is likely to lose agential options when having to perform gratefulness as reciprocation, in the form

of diminished self-respect, reputation, and/or appointed future commitments. This circumstance might emphasize the subordinate role of the empoweree while confirming the empowerer's dominance and therewith create feelings of indignation on the side of the empoweree. Holmqvist (2008) captured this aspect exemplarily in his case study *The Institutionalization of Social Welfare*, investigating a Swedish welfare organization (Samhall) that explicitly aims at the *empowerment* of occupationally disabled people (p. 44). One of Holmqvist's respondents expresses frustration about having to be grateful for an, according to him, undesirable situation:

After so many years within the company, I've learned exactly how the ideal Samhall worker should be constituted: You shouldn't object, not think at all, accept everything corporate management devises and even be glad and thankful for the great honor of working there. (p. 93)

Paternalistic Aspects of Empowerment

The third communicative consequence of power transfers follows from the aforementioned issues. Considering that the empowerer not only can be assumed to be significantly more powerful than the empoweree but that the empowerer also is presenting the empoweree with a special kind of "gift," it is reasonable to argue that it usually is the *giver* who decides the type and size of the gift, not the recipient, which seems logical from a structural point of view. However, seen from a communicative point of view, this can have serious consequences for the empoweree, who might find it unfeasible to reject a sufficiently valuable resource "only" on the grounds of not having had a say in the type or size of the resource. Yet accepting the resource under such circumstances may let the empoweree feel subordinate and effectively disempowered because, as Eylon (1998) noted, "the very fact that one group is in the position to judge if others are dis-empowered and then to decide what to 'give' so that they will become 'empowered' indicates that true empowerment is not occurring" (p. 21).

Situations such as these in which a powerful party dominates a less powerful party by implying a benevolent attitude are referred to as *paternalism* by philosophers (Archard 1990; Clarke 2002; Dworkin 1983; Gert and Culver 1976; Grill 2007; Mill [1859] 1991; Sartorius 1983; Sennett 1993). The main problem with paternalism is not so much the high power differential as such but the implied message that is being communicated: the less powerful individual is not only less powerful but also less competent and thus unable to direct his or her own destiny.

Empowerment processes can, in spite of good intentions, nevertheless be considered as paternalistic when the professional [social worker] as an expert maneuvers the service user toward a goal that the professional considers the best and where empowerment processes are managed within predetermined frameworks. (Kvarnström, Hedberg, and Cedersund 2012:302)

Additionally, as paternalism always comprises the communication of *benevolence*, the less powerful party is not in the position to challenge the social relationship between benefactor/empowerer and beneficiary/empoweree. Rather, the empoweree might feel strongly that the empowerer's benevolent act demands gratefulness and, therewith, the acknowledgment of the empowerer's superiority as legitimate, a social situation of indebtedness that can never be balanced. Goodell et al. (1985) formulated this issue in connection with the effects of state paternalism: "The very nature of what [the state] grants emphasizes the state's vast power and the recipients' superfluosity, and therefore there is no way in which the latter can relieve themselves of their debt" (p. 253).

Accepting resources under paternalistic circumstances can have rather distressing psychosocial effects on the empoweree: apart from feeling dominated, disempowered, and looked down on, paternalism is often perceived as patronizing and humiliating (Lindner 2006; Statman 2000). Thus, although empowerers might intend to abolish certain dependencies, they might, in fact, reproduce these same dependencies, leaving the empoweree with a constant need for empowerment. Sennett (1993) expressed this in a nutshell when he wrote about paternalism: "There is a promise of nurturance made in paternalistic ideologies, and the essential quality of nurturance is denied: that one's care will make another person grow stronger" (p. 82).

The Paradox of Empowerment

The idea behind the communicative approach applied here to analyze empowerment is to *contextualize* communicative interaction: social actions do not occur in a social vacuum but involve communicative meanings that have to be understood and interpreted identically by both interaction partners in order for the interaction to be successful. This approach revealed some issues related to empowerment, which have not been dealt with from this viewpoint previously.

First, the attempt to empower is meaningful only as long as the empowering party A is in fact more powerful than the to-be-empowered party B. However, as necessary as this power differential is for the interaction to make sense, it also emphasizes the less powerful party's subordinate position in relation to A, a fact that might evoke a variety of negative feelings on the side of the empoweree. Furthermore, although the newly gained agential options might be quite significant to B, the empowerer's loss of agential resources due to empowering B is likely to be perceived as rather small by the empowerer. This can, again, be perceived as a sign of inferiority by the empoweree who seems to need the empowerer more than the empowerer needs the less powerful person.

Second, although the empowerer's loss of agential options might support the supposedly altruistic character of empowerment, the communicative approach revealed that acts of giving cannot be free of reciprocity expectations, whether they be explicit or implicit. Yet as B is not in the position to

reciprocate a transfer of resources with equivalent means, the only way of reciprocation for B is to be grateful to A. However, not least the fact that A is culturally *entitled* to expect B's gratitude is likely to put B in a rather unfavorable position: B must show gratitude toward A, whether or not B wanted, needed, or liked the transferred resource.

Third, the social situation of being able to actually decide *whether* and *how* to empower someone is likely to imply that the empowerer A knows better what is good for the empoweree B than B knows himself or herself. No matter if A indeed knows better than B, acting empowering can, thus, communicate a paternalistic attitude, which can lead to disappointing, weakening, and disempowering rather than strengthening the empoweree.

Summarizing, I argue that what makes empowerment paradoxical is the fact that although a situation might be intended to be valuable and profitable for the empoweree (in terms of material resources such as money, as well as psychological resources such as information, responsibility, etc.), empowering measures have a potential of turning out to be weakening and costly for the empoweree instead. In contrast to what the empowerer might regard as profitable assets, the costliness for the empoweree does not appear on a material level of resources but rather on an emotional and/or interpersonal level, for instance in the form of reduced self-esteem, fear of bad reputation, decrease in self-respect, and so on.

Thus, I argue further that the paradox evolves from discrepancies between approaching empowerment from a structural as opposed to a communicative viewpoint and the fact that neither of these two can be left disregarded when analyzing social interactions. It is quite understandable that an empowerer's view of an arrangement such as this is rather transactional and economic. However, from the empoweree's point of view, such a transfer is not just a transfer of resources but is part of a larger construct, involving, to a high degree, communicative meanings that are transferred along the resources. These meanings might not always turn out to be as positive as an empowerer would like to think.

Discussion and Conclusion

Considering that power transfers are ubiquitous in social interactions, one might assume that empowerment does not differ substantially from other ways of transferring power. However, I argue that the use of the term *empowerment* suggests being more than just that: It is meant to signify an intrinsically positive change for the better. Whereas *help*, *support*, *assistance*, *subsidy*, and *benefits* may raise negative emotions in receivers due to these terms' underlying implication of addressing "victims," the term *empowerment* seems, at first glance, mainly to communicate strength and independence. It is not surprising, therefore, that almost every field of research and practice *concerned with the powerless* has a tendency toward adopting empowerment as a seemingly uncomplicated way to improvement. What the above

analysis shows is that the process of empowering people needs to be taken seriously: empowerment is more complex than its name might suggest and as a structural view might reveal. The analysis also provides insights as to the possible, negative psychological consequences of (dis)empowering communication.

As desirable and necessary as it might sound to empower refugees, the elderly, ethnic minorities, the disabled, poor, those marginalized or discriminated against, whether the receivers of empowerment will truly feel empowered will depend on how the empowerer treats the intricate social processes taking place in empowerment situations.

Thus, in terms of its practical relevance, this theoretical analysis can hopefully be used as a starting point for questioning the use of empowerment as quick fix and to rethink empowerment efforts. The problematic aspects of empowerment mentioned here cannot be entirely eliminated from empowerment initiatives. Yet knowledge of their existence and workings might help practitioners such as social workers, social welfare agency officers, managers in organizations and institutions working for and with disadvantaged people, and so on, to be aware of the delicate balance between empowerment and paternalism, substantial support, and suppression. Practitioners might choose to be more sensitive about their way of communicating by trying to avoid playing or underlining the role of the grand benefactor while at the same time making an effort to include empowerees in decisions concerning their needs and wishes. Last, to communicate clearly what is, and what is not, expected by the empoweree in terms of reciprocity helps create an explicit and honest foundation for empowering interaction.

In terms of its theoretical relevance, the purpose of this article was to find theoretical landmarks from which more detailed theoretical, as well as empirical, work can depart. What is not solved here is the question whether the theoretical ideas put forward can be transferred to all kinds of empowerment relevant areas. There might be differences between fields or groups that are not captured in this analysis. It would be the task for future research to investigate concrete contexts and empowerment situations.

Furthermore, the argued for zero-sum character of power raises the legitimate question of whether empowering *synergies* are possible. I assume here that A, by definition, loses agential options when empowering B. The question arises whether (1) synergies are at all possible in empowerment contexts and (2) if they are possible, how do empowering situations have to be designed to achieve true synergies, and (3) can such situations, then, be called empowerment? Answering these questions requires further theorizing and empirical research.

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