

**You are encouraged to read the whole book, and please make a proper citation if needed.**

Adams, R. (2003). *Social work and empowerment* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Ingredients of empowerment:

1. The concept of empowerment should be constantly redefined and reconstructed not just by so-called professionals but also through the actions and words of people wanting greater control over the services they receive. (3)
2. Three important points about empowerment emerge. First, there is a risk that empowerment will be tacked onto bad practice in a *tokenistic* way rather than making a difference to practice as a whole. (4)
3. Secondly, although empowerment is vital to successful social work, its position is uncertain, or *problematic*. At its strongest, it is a challenging concept pointing to the imperative for those who have least and are treated most unjustly in society to take power and rise up against that injustice in society to take power and rise up against that injustice, against the people and the structures which oppress them. At its weakest, it may be diluted or taken over altogether by professionals and others in powerful positions, so that it fits neatly and benignly into professional frameworks and does not change the ways people receiving services are controlled, managed, assessed and treated. (4)
4. Third, empowerment is also a paradoxical aspect of practice. In order for a practitioner to empower somebody, they need to act, even if this action is facilitation rather than intervention...But how does the practitioner manage the tension between minimizing risk and empowering the person? (4)
5. Working definitions of empowerment: empowerment means different things to different people. But we need a working definition to get us started. The Dictionary of Social Work links empowerment with self-help:
  - Empowerment can refer to user participation in services and to the self-help movement generally, in which groups take action on their own behalf, either in cooperation with, or independently of, the statutory services (Thomas & Pierson, 1995, pp.134-5).
  - Empowerment may be defined as: the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. (8)

6. Related concepts:

- Reflexivity and criticality: by its nature, empowerment is a critical activity. Criticality is inherent in empowerment-in-practice. Self-empowerment and self-advocacy necessitate reflexivity by the individual. Reflexivity involves using the impact of a situation or experience on oneself to help understanding and feed into future activity. (10)
- Consciousness-raising: although empowerment does not always figure explicitly in the literature concerning consciousness-raising, it is implicit in the process. (10)
- User-led practice: from the 1970s, there has been a trend towards people in receipt of welfare benefits and health and personal social services demanding more control over the services provided for them. (10)
- Radical social work: Thompson linked empowerment with radical social work, describing it as: an approach to social work which seeks to locate the problems experienced by clients in the wider social context of structured inequalities, poverty, inadequate amenities, discrimination and oppression. It sees social work as primarily a political venture, a *struggle* to humanize, as far as possible the oppressive circumstances to which clients are subject. It is premised on the key notion of empowerment, the process of giving greater power to clients in whatever ways possible – resources, education, political and self-awareness and so on (Thompson, 1993, p.32). (11-12)
- Anti-oppressive practice: critiques of oppression from black, feminist, anti-ageist and disability perspectives have all converged on the concept of, and need for, empowerment. This growing body of literature on anti-oppressive practice in social work has been responsible, more than any other factor, for enhancing the significance of the paradigm of empowering social work. (12)
- Postmodernism and social work in the new age: the postmodern era, some commentators claim, provides opportunities for a politics which transcends the grand theories, such as those of Marx, and gives space to a multiplicity of diverse voices. The fragmentation of the personal social services into many small providers could be seen as one manifestation of the disaggregation of the large, monopolistic local authority providers...In the postmodern era, empowerment and anti-oppressive work have the potential to become either the new unifying, or divisive, themes of social work. (13)

7. These examples imply a need to view hesitantly totalizing frameworks for the concept of empowerment and any attempt to construct a global framework for the application of empowerment to practice. Further, they lay a basis for the critique of dominant knowledges of professional practice, embodied in the more tentative and anti-oppressive framework for empowerment-in-practice. (15)
8. Some risks associated with empowerment:
  - Paradox of empowering without doing people's empowering for them: there is a risk that a book about empowering work will slip into the assumption that it is largely or wholly professionals who empower other people, such as service users; (15)
  - One person's empowerment may be another person's disempowerment: the process of empowerment operates at the levels of the individual, group, family, organization and community, and also in the different sectors of people's lives; (16)
  - Danger of dilution: from empowerment to enablement: by the nature of the popularity of the concept of empowerment, there is a danger of attaching it to social work activities in an inappropriate way and also of reducing its scope and power to improve people's circumstances. (16);
  - Dangers of addressing too many target groups and speaking to none adequately: empowerment may also be applied not only to clients as self-helpers but also to social workers themselves. Whilst intrinsically valid, this may deflect attention away from the clients who should be the main focus of empowerment activities. (16)
  - Ambiguous relationship between self-help and empowerment: self-help and empowerment have been coopted by two sets of interests which are fundamentally opposed to each other: consumerism and a variety of groups and movements for democratic control by users. Consequently, at the heart of the concepts of self-help and empowerment lies the ambiguity inherent in their embodying both individualist and collectivist ideologies. (16)

#### Frameworks for empowerment

1. Problems of power and empowerment: this richness of theorists and activists in the contemporary field of empowerment is partly responsible for the lack of synthesis in the concept and its application to practice. At the heart of this are two key problems: those arising from the diversity of perspectives on power and those arising from the concept of empowerment of people who, characteristically in the social services, are

experiencing problems and weaknesses which they perceive as inherent in their circumstances. (32)

2. Perspectives on power: creating problems for empowerment: there are three main reasons why the concept of power at the heart of empowerment does not immediately suggest to practitioners how they may empower people: (32)
  - There is no single view among theorists of what power is. Power is a problematic concept at the heart of empowerment, which can be conceptualized in different ways, which affect how the exercise of power appears. (32)
  - Social workers are not in a position simply to give clients power, because social workers themselves exercise powers, duties and responsibilities that do not originate in them but in the laws and organizations which are the basis for their practice (Harris, 2002). (33)
  - The conceptualizing of power too often focuses on its social, structural and organizational aspects and fails to connect with this an analysis of how the individual is disempowered or empowered. (33)
3. But the character of empowerment in social work represents a paradigmatic change – revolution – rather than a gradual shift – evolution. This is justified by the inextricable embedding of the empowerment paradigm in anti-oppressive discourse. It makes necessary the reinterpretation of the entire social work literature through the concept of empowerment. Empowerment offers a new approach or paradigm, rather than a modification of an existing one. (34)
4. Although it involves a somewhat artificial simplification not reflected in the complex picture of practice, we can say that social work from the 1960s onwards was concerned more with the treatment of clients, whilst from the late 1980s onwards it was concerned more with the empowerment of service users. Space precludes an in-depth exploration of the implications of this shift. Theories and practices rooted in feminism, black liberation, social action, community work or radical politics – concerning empowerment of individuals, groups, organizations and communities – gained ground during the 1970s and 80s and had come of age by the early 1990s. (370)
5. Empowerment: on a continuum – O’Sullivan (1994) provides a typology of possibilities on a horizontal axis or continuum: proposing that a continuum exists between total domination by the worker at one extreme and total control by the service user at the other. In between are various combinations, at a midpoint involving partnership between equal parties. To the extent that empowered people act autonomously while partners share power, entering into a partnership may

actually be experienced by some people as disempowering. The question arises as to whether there are points on the continuum where a conceptual break or qualitative gulf exists, between partnership, which may actually be disempowering for one of the partners, who may otherwise have been autonomous and empowered, and empowerment. (38)

6. Empowerment: as reflective practice – This draws on the work of Donald Schon (1991) and involves a rigorous approach to reflecting on practice, and reformulating goals and methods of working, as the action proceeds. Social work, among other human services professions, is viewed as requiring an approach to practice based on reflection-in-action, rather than the technical/rational approach typical of those professions, such as engineering and the law, where the knowledge base is less uncertain and the technologies for carrying out the work are more established and clear cut. (39)
7. Empowerment: as a ladder – Arnstein (1969) distinguishes different relationships between workers and community members by reference to a hierarchical image: a ladder from the most controlling or manipulative at the lowest rungs, through to the fully participative at the top rungs. If the concept of empowerment were to be transposed back through time to the late 1960s, then it is likely that Arnstein would have conceived this typology of citizen participation in terms of the degree of empowerment or disempowerment embodied in each position. Implicitly, the image of the ladder conveys a value judgment about higher positions being preferable. (39)
8. Empowerment: consciousness-raising through a dialogic process: Freire's contribution is to provide a model whereby the consciousness-raising process can link the circumstances of the individual with those of the social context, thereby providing a route to empowerment in the different domains, focused on the individual in society. (39)
9. Empowerment: as a generic means of anti-oppressive practice: Phillipson (1992) portrays a hierarchy of anti-oppressive practice from specialist feminist practice, through the specific area of anti-sexist practice to the universal level of anti-oppressive practice. She locates empowerment at the top of this hierarchy, implying that it is the universal means to achieve liberation. (39)

Domains of empowerment

