The meaning of empowerment: the interdisciplinary etymology of a new management concept

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Introduction

Empowerment has become a widely used management termof the 1990s. However, in practical terms , it shares the ambiguity of its predecessors in the HRM tradition. For its proponents, empowerment is a humanistic device to improve the quality of working life for ordinary employees. For its critics it is the latest management ruse to intensify work and shift risk. Unlike TQM on BPR, however, empowerment is also a highly elusive theoretical concept. It has no single guru, nor does it define a clear-cut set of policy initiatives. Instead, it is much more free-floating, evolving in vague terms, a new liberated world of work. This article sets out to unravel the web of meaning surrounding empowerment to show what a 'contested concept' it is. We do so by surveying its usage across the social science disciplines. The approach discussed here contributes to the examination of HRM discourse and management rhetoric (Legge, 1995; Keenoy, 1990).

CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

One of the major issues in the debate on empowerment is, to do with definition. The term “empowerment” is used across a wide range of disciplines and each brings differing interpretations. An investigation into the etymon of “empowerment” exposes a basis for this subjectivity.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "empowerment" as "the action of empowering; the state of being empowered" and it was first used in this form in 1849. However, the verb "empower" from which this noun is derived was first apparent in the English Language some two hundred years before. The word "empower" is of French and Latin derivation consisting of the preposition "em" and the noun "power". "Em" probably comes from the Old French for "en" - they were, at one time, interchangeable words meaning "in". The Latin source of "em" is, however, more complicated. "Em" and "en" also held the same definition - to "look" or "come", This provokes interesting thought as to modern interpretations of the word "empowerment"

but it is more likely that its origins lie with the preposition "in" which denoted space and was defined as "into; onto; towards or against". This form of the Latin would explain the emergence of another spelling of the word - "impower". The first recorded use of the word "empower" and its derivations was in the Seventeenth Century by Hamon L'Estrange in his book *'The Reign of King Charles'* This first usage was synonymous with the idea of authorizing or licensing: "Letters from the Pope", wrote L'Estrange, "empowering them to erect this college". The idea of authorizing and licensing is one that the Oxford English Dictionary still sees as common and, indeed, this remains the legal and constitutional usage of the term in the present day. Additionally, it acknowledges the existence of a second definition which is to "impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to enable, permit" which was first used in 1667 by Milton in his famous work 'Paradise Lost': "Thou us impow'rd to fortifie thus farr".

However, there are two original definitions of the word "empower" which the Oxford English Dictionary states are now rare or obsolete. These are "to bestow power upon, make powerful" and "to gain or assume power over". The apparent obsolescence of these definitions may surprise many modern theorists who rely solely or partly on these definitions to support their theories of empowerment. It seems that we must move away from the connection of empowerment to power per se and address instead its more indirect end, as per the Oxford English Dictionary, more common usage, that is the acknowledgement of power to achieve an end rather than as an end in itself. In this respect power is an essential component of any interpretation of empowerment, not least because it remains its root word. The original usage of the word and its present definitions do not refute this, however there is a danger that over the hundreds of years which empowerment has been used the importance of power has been over-emphasised. Nowadays there is a constant need to remind the reader that empowerment is not "power itself" but is a process by which the latter is only bestowed to an end or for a purpose. Lukes (1974) argues that power is the capacity not only to impose one's will but also to set the terms of agreement, in this sense one would see power as something which one has over another. The conception of power as "power over another" is predominant in the literature, indeed the interpretation of

power in terms of domination and oppression emerges from a review of the use of empowerment across disciplines.

The Use of Empowerment across Non-Management Disciplines.

At first glance, the non-management literature might be summarised as defining empowerment through a notion of powerlessness and oppression. It is perceived as the use of certain techniques to transform those without power into equitable positions. This occurs due to the fact that the oppressed recognise that there is an alternative way of living and that oppression does not have to be tolerated. As West (1990) wrote, "it is because we have some idea of a more authentic identity, that we can condemn existing identities as formed under constraints, as unauthentic, but most importantly as replaceable" (1990: 130). This is illustrative of the inextricable links between empowerment and politics. Not only is the term politically loaded, used as it is to pertain to the revolt of the oppressed, but also politics is itself an area in which "empowerment" has taken affect. West (1990), in his book "*Authenticity And Empowerment"*, challenges the assumption that we live in a "free world" and promotes a new theory of liberation. He attacks traditional politics for failing to connect political problems to effective political practices and, hence, producing an apathetic and frustrated affluent majority who, unconsciously, allow oppression to continue. West argues that, according to theories of rationality, people are both individuals and social beings and that the culture within which an individual lives must be seen by them to be "authentic" - that is, consistent with their beliefs and values. If it fails to meet these needs, an alternative culture which holds greater authenticity will be sought and that through this "dissident" culture the individuals will seek the collective goals of their members in the face of indifference from wider society. This process requires a combination of emancipation and empowerment, "a culture which did not in some way emancipate would not attract people to it. A culture which did not empower would not survive" (1990: 71). Emancipation involves attracting people to a culture for fulfilment. A culture empowers if it proposes, in the words of West, "forms of life which foster the collective strength and resolve of all those who belong (to it)" (1990:71).

Despite this explanation of rationality, West argues it is not always exercised due to the social system, political power, and other intervening factors. He contends that although such concepts of authenticity and empowerment are useful in the politics of liberation, one important thing should be remembered - "there is no universally primary struggle, no justification for the hegemony of a particular class or category within society" (1990: 174). This reminds us that "empowerment" must not be defined as the giving away or the gaining of power, empowerment is not a revolutionary act, rather empowerment eradicates oppressive power and acts to enable the whole population in a free and fair world. However, this definition remains a wide generalisation and it adds little to our understanding of the term in management literature. For this, a closer look is required at the usage and interpretation of "empowerment" throughout the literature which is best examined in five sections: women; minority groups; education; community care; and political orientation.

The Empowerment Of Women

It is the basis of feminist literature that women are subject to oppression by men who, through the ages, have achieved domination through power. This power has been gained not only through individual qualities of men (for example, through physical strength) but also through the long-established patriarchal society in which we live (for example, through the legal system). Thus, if women are to fight oppression they must tackle it both on a personal and a wider social basis. Related to this is the definition of the term "empowerment" by Bookman and Morgen which states that it connotes "a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge the basic power relations in our society" (1988:4). Considering this, the literature generally covers those areas in which women are most subject to the abuse of male power: physical violence; sexual encounters; the workplace and the family. Within each of these areas of study, women seek different ways to conquer oppression and, therefore, empowerment methods vary. Bookman and Morgen (1988) see empowerment as the recognition of the forces which act to oppress women and the motivation to change those factors in each woman's life which allow them to act. This process is neither easy nor does it follow a linear pattern, contend the authors, instead "it takes twists and turns, includes both resistance and consent, and ebbs and flows as groups with different relations to the structures and

sources of power came into conflict" (1988:4). Many have noted in the feminist literature that the empowerment of women does not involve the disempowerment of men. The assumption that this might be so is based on the concept of "power" which is ordinarily seen as a one dimensional term: that is, power is either a "good" or a "bad" thing. The fact that power can be mobilized in oppressive AND empowering ways must be recognised if one is to avoid the viscious circle of oppression. As Hall (1992) wrote "It is not women's purpose to take power from men; rather, the goal of women is to develop their own power while respecting men for who they are" (1992: 104). In short power is not zero sum.

If we examine the issue of battered women, it is suggested that the superior physical strength of the male species puts women at an immediate disadvantage as regards violence. Male violence is seen by feminist writers as an abuse of their power to subordinate women into feelings of inferiority. (Holland et al 1991). They identified two components of female empowerment. The first is intellectual empowerment (which refers to the knowledge and expectations which a woman holds) and the second is experiential empowerment (the capacity to control behaviour). These two concepts are independent of each other and the authors argue that "empowerment at one level does not necessarily entail empowerment at another" (1991: 2). Additionally, and particularly relevant to physical abuse, was the addition of a third dimension of empowerment, the transitional level of the network. This relies on the idea that empowerment is context-dependent, where a young woman's intellectual empowerment (knowledge and expectations) is mismatched with her capacity to control her sexuality/ the violence in practice (experiential empowerment). The existence of this "transitional" level reflects the idea that empowerment is not a process which ends but that it is a continual struggle which constantly needs attention and reaffirmation. Indeed, the concern is that battered women often find themselves at the transitional level and that, however empowered a woman is intellectually, there is always a danger with physical abuse that experiential empowerment will fail. The significance of this notion to organisational theory is that one might argue that no matter how authentic their enthusiasm and desire for empowerment, employees rely on management not to abuse their greater power and hence to experientially empower their employees.

Returning to the fate of abused women, due to the physical superiority of men, women tend to have two immediate options in a violent situation - either to walk away or to risk fighting back. It is considered essential that if a woman does walk away and leave her abusive partner that she not only undergoes therapy but that a certain amount of independence is instilled in her to prevent her returning to the abuser, a common problem with domestic abuse. "A therapeutic approach" writes Reinelt (1994) "..often reinforces dependency and does not improve the economic conditions of women's lives that may enable them to live independently" (1994:691). Women must take control of their own lives by talking to each other and transferring their problem from one which is intrinsically personal to recognising that other women are affected too and that the problem is not the woman, or indeed women as a whole, but the abuse of male gender structures. Once the problem is externalised, women can try and tackle it. As Schecter (1982) concluded on the topic of empowerment, "Its premise is to turn individual defeats into victories through giving women tools to better control their lives and joining in collective struggle" (1982:109). In this way, empowerment could be seen as holding a different meaning and encouraging different empowering procedures when related to diversity within oppressed groups. This process might also be relevant when constructing a definition of employee empowerment. Organisational empowerment affects all those within an organisation and yet, as in the case of women, within this group there are many different sub-groups. Those that are empowered in a workplace come from, for example, different backgrounds, have different levels of education, work for different divisions of the organisation, have different roles, and are at different levels of the hierarchy. These internal divisions must be recognised. As West (1990) writes, "to avoid a destructive fragmentation of the group the members must, in the first place, be concerned with the progressive formation of those on the 'oppressor' side of these internal divisions" (1990: 134).

Empowerment and Minority Groups

Membership of a minority brings with it automatic powerlessness in a country led by a majority. Laws, rules and attitudes most commonly reflect those in positions of power and act against those that differ from the norm. Empowerment emerges, therefore, as a common theme in the literature covering the lives of minority groups in such areas

as race, sexuality, disability and age. There is an assumption here that the oppressed are somehow "driven" to right the injustices which they have suffered. West (1990) attributes this to the fact that once a more authentic identity has been identified, "the existing culture is a place of frustration and low self-esteem for them" (1990: 73). The anger and resentment they feel towards this surrounding culture drives them to be proactive in their fight for equality. Such social movements, concluded West, combine the virtues of empowerment with the pleasures and fulfilment of authenticity.

Most prevalent in the literature are the references to the empowerment of a racial minority. Solomon (1976) discusses the source of oppression, in this instance, as the blocking of two sources of power: direct and indirect. The first relates to the specific restriction of access to resources which is a societal source and the second relates to the individual experiences of minorities and how these experiences are mediated by significant others. Soloman refers to the importance of social work in getting black people to recognise their value and their ability to meet self-determined goals through linking them with resources, helping them gain self-knowledge and completing certain tasks. Empowerment is defined by Solomon as "the process whereby persons who belong to a stigmatised social category throughout their lives can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and the performance of valued social roles" (1976: 6). That similar processes with employees may be beneficial is plausible. The ability to meet self-determined goals, self-knowledge and the link with resources all appear to be important qualities of an empowered employee.

Perry (1980) highlights the socioeconomic impact of black empowerment in a political forum. Taking a rural southern locality in Alabama (Hich became the first biracial political entity in the United States to be completely black-governed), Perry looks at the benefits received by Blacks and how these have changed since black political control. While there benefits to black political participation in Greene County Perry states that "black political empowerment has not been without its shortcomings" (1980: 219). The problem seems to be that in ten years, blacks went from having no political power at all to dominance in the political arena. Perry classes this as empowerment, but many would argue that, although the process was an

empowering one, the outcome is not one of empowerment because the attitudes and opinions which were created over a long period of oppression and disadvantage have not disappeared. Indeed, Perry reported that the black public officials failed to bring about an integrated school system as "the resistance of whites to integration made the creation of an integrated school system unachievable" (1980: 220). In this sense, whilst the oppressed minority had gained ‘power’ and ‘control’ in a symbolic sense, underlying attitudes of the dominant group had not altered and, in this sense, the black community were not considered by Perry as truly empowered. Perhaps "political empowerment would seem to require a prior process of social empowerment through which effective participation in politics becomes possible" (Friedman 1992: 34). Relating it to Marchington’s et al (1992) escalator of participation, one might argue that employee control of organizations, which they translated as “employee-owned organizations” are not necessarily empowering unless management attitudes reflect this level of employee control.

Empowerment and Education

Empowerment is inextricably linked to education. Not only is education a crucial part of all empowerment programmes but it also acts to empower in itself. For those who are illiterate, have to adapt to a second language or are deaf, for example, education is crucial for them to develop a sense of self-worth and empowerment. In the educational literature, much is made of the substantive and symbolic concepts which the term "empowerment" encapsulates. The idea is that empowerment can both refer to a substantive form of change at the individual level and a more symbolic form of change at the societal level. This encourages educational theorists to question who exactly education empowers - individuals or groups? Griffin (1992), in his study of the links between empowerment and experiential learning, suggests that education empowers everyone through a respect for each individual and their personal targets of the programme. However, he seems at odds with the idea that a substantive change at the level of the individual will be reflected in substantive social change, "assuming that empowerment is intended to convey a sense of politics, I want to suggest" he wrote, "that whereas the capacity of experiential learning for personal empowerment is very real, as practitioners know full well, its capacity for social change or transformation is very limited indeed" (1992: 31).

In the educational literature, empowerment has tended to be focused either on the teachers, or to a smaller extent, on students. As it refers to teachers, empowerment describes the technique by which the delivery of educational services is much more "effective". But as it concerns students the issue of empowerment is more complicated. Student empowerment was said to have been achieved by Patrick Courts (1991) at a time when, "they have begun to gain a sense of their own power as learners and meaning makers" (1991: 148). In the case of illiteracy the author states that language brings empowerment, "once the possibility of language becomes an operative fact in the human being's life" he wrote, "it becomes enormously significant..in the process of naming that which had no name, in the process of learning that there are names, the human begins to feel power" (1991: 13). The author, however, does not confine themselves to the illiterate, those that might be said to be oppressed, he also looks at the power of developing language and skills in reading, writing, listening and discussing amongst "normal" students in order to put them in a more powerful position in the world.

Education also helps those that are members of a minority group. This is particularly true for those who are immigrants or a foreign speaking minority of a particular country. In this situation there is a struggle to maintain some sense of oneself whilst accepting that the norms, mores and language of the ruling country must be acknowledged. Bullivant (1995) discussed this dilemma with respect to immigrants to Australia. He talks of the power of the educational system to reproduce the interests of the ruling or dominant class and the need for education to move away from this "power over" towards an empowerment of all schoolchildren. He bases his conclusions on a study of the evolution in Australia of language and culture programmes which aim to empower cultural minorities. He explains that prior to 1973 immigrants were expected to abandon their own backgrounds, culture and language and conform to the majority. Over the years this has changed, he explains, through various stages of multicultural involvement to the present day. The emphasis has now moved away from the desire to incorporate minorities to a need for encouraging differences and diversity in order to remain economically competitive. In short, prominence has progressed from individual empowerment to

macroempowerment. One might speculate, cynically, that economic reasons may similarly be the reason for empowerment within organisations. The desire to remain competitive drives management to look for ways to improve efficiency and concludes that one way is through the devolvement of responsibility. That empowerment only occurs as a result of economic difficulties drains it of its critical edge and reverts its meaning to one of superficiality.

Education can sometimes hold different empowerment potential for different people, particularly in situations of a dominant group and a minority, Al-Haj (1995) wrote of the Arab minority in Israel, "while Palestinians have seen education throughout the different periods as a source of empowerment, the dominant groups have utilized the education system as a mechanism of social control" (1995: 215). Education allows the dominant group to remove from impressionable minds any development of minority tolerance or national consciousness and enforce the official, ruling ideology, therefore oppressing the minority groups through the education of their children. Yet, on the contrary, the minorities see the education system as empowering in that they can improve their status in the wider society through educational achievement and that, by exerting public pressure and developing parallel informal education, they can force the dominant group to allow some changes in the education system. True empowerment, it seems, is not really achieved through these means, as Al-Haj notes, "it is, of course, a relationship carefully designed by the majority in order to maintain dependency and prevent the minority from determining the content of its own education" (1995: 223).

Empowerment and Community Care

Community Care is conventionally defined as involving those who are physically disabled; mentally ill; have a learning disability; or are elderly. It generally also includes those who suffer from alcohol or drug dependence. It is the predicament of these people, their carers, and their social workers that are discussed with relation to empowerment. "A new buzz word has entered the vocabulary of social work - empowerment", write Mullender and Ward (1991), "to be seen as progressive and credible, everyone is trying to jump on the bandwagon" (1991: 1). Like organisational theory, social work has been subject to a wash of literature on the merits of empowerment and the need for it to be central to any practitioner's mindset. However,

the authors go on to say that there remains a concern that "unless it is accompanied by a commitment to challenging and combating injustice and oppression, which shows itself in actions as well as words, this professional Newspeak...allows us all, as practitioners, to rewrite accounts of our practice without fundamentally changing the way it is experienced by service users" (1991: 3). Hence, the authors see empowerment as not just some form of ideology but an operational term which can be most clearly understood in relation to oppression which they define as both a state of affairs and a process which acts to unjustly limit the lives of those with less power.

On this understanding, then, empowerment in community care works to give rights to its users and those that care for them. This is done in a number of ways. Indeed Stevenson and Parsloe (1993) see empowerment as relating to decisions not only over the larger issues which affect everyone but also over the much smaller, seemingly inconsequential matters. Here the dichotomy re-emerges between individual and social factors. They explain that having the opportunity to make choices is not only about having the freedom of choice as to residential homes but also as to whether you can open a window without asking. "Small victories may have a significant impact on the morale and are intrinsically empowering" they wrote, but qualified this by reiterating that "they cannot be a substitute for choice over the major issues" (1993: 8). In this way oppression is being tackled both at the personal and group levels.

Empowerment of those that use the services of Community Care and those that care for them is itself reliant on the empowerment of the social workers themselves, (Stevenson and Parsloe, 1993). They explain the need for a new culture which can lift the limits oppressing the workers and change not only the way they work but also how they feel about their work. Such commitment for change must come from the managers, they claim (resembling the recommendations made by management theorists) and go on to say that, "managers will be in a stronger position to require, but also to help with, this attitude change in others if they too are changing" (1993: 10). The problem remains, however, as to how social workers can make users feel empowered and not even more powerless when they have to put them through the processes of assessing their needs, managing their care and other potentially patronising procedures. Smale et al (1993) suggest that this is best overcome through

adopting a policy of "empathy" whereby, instead of just questioning and probing the user, the worker assumes the user is the expert of his particular situation and acts to develop their understanding of it. This recognition that those more in touch with a particular situation are more likely to be the expert in that situation is particularly central to empowerment in community care. "It is crucial to avoid a split between those who are in day-to-day or frequent contact, and those who make decisions about what is to be done and the allocation of resources," wrote Smale et al, "splitting these two will inevitably be disempowering" (1993: 42).

Where users of the service and their carers appear to be having a real say in what happens to them, their oppression is deep-rooted, attitudes are difficult to change and the inclusion of the physically and mentally disabled and the elderly, who are too often dismissed by society, in major decisions may still be a long way off. However, Stevenson and Parsloe (1993)'s perspective on the personal social services they studied is encouraging, "what we have seen and heard is deeply moving" they wrote, "it shows workers creating 'islands' of empowerment over matters in which they have influence, in the deep and turbulent sea of social disempowerment through poverty, racism, unemployment and homelessness" (1993: 14).

Empowerment and Politics

Political literature seems to embrace the term "empowerment" at three different levels. Empowerment is described at a national level as the result of a revolution whereby new leaders aim to reduce inequity; on a local level through the strengthening of mediating agencies which allow closer ties with individual communities; and on a personal level as a result of the customer revolution and the advent of consumerism.

On a national level, revolution is achieved through the mobilizing of a dissident group to overthrow the existing leadership. Such a revolution in China led to a communist victory under Chairman Mao's rule. That there was a resulting improvement in social welfare is without doubt, as Woetzel (1989) wrote, "most importantly, the social revolution achieved one of the most equal redistributions of wealth in history. The extremes of ostentation and starvation common under previous regimes were virtually wiped out" (1989: 162). However, problems remained; the "feudal economy" failed

to be converted along with other changes and resource allocation became increasingly a function of personal connections. In fact, Woetzel claimed that rather than "empowering" individuals within China the cultural revolution " encouraged this trend by pushing more power into the hands of one man in the factory, destroying incentives and nurturing a cult of leadership" (1989: 163). This does not imply that empowerment is not possible through revolution, Woetzel argued that the redistribution of wealth and the elimination of imperialism had removed two large stumbling blocks to individual empowerment, rather that empowerment is not in itself revolutionary. From this one might see that, in the case of a worker revolution, if workers were to assume power over a factory, empowerment would not necessarily follow as it is independent of power per se.

Local empowerment is associated, with the government and its attempts to bring customers and their requirements to the forefront of national policy. From an individual point of view, one might find this commendable as it reduces the feeling of powerlessness which Berger and Neuhaus (1977) attributed to "institutions controlled by those whom we do not know and whose values we often do not share" (1977:7). The principle of local empowerment is that the Government and public policy give more recognition, respect and involvement to satellite institutions. Yet empowerment, as assumed by Berger and Neuhaus (1977) and Bennett et al (1994) has two interpretations in the area of local empowerment. The first, as stated above is the extending of responsibility and prominence to the local branches; the second involves, through the aforementioned process, the empowerment of the population. In effect this latter usage of "empowerment", as in the case of the North American communities discussed earlier, describes the way in which a pluralist society can reach out and touch all groups within it - empowering the minorities. As Berger and Neuhaus write, "the paradigm of mediating structures aims at empowering poor people to do the things that the more affluent can already do, aims at spreading the power around a bit more...and to do so where it matters, in people's control over their own lives" (1977: 8).

An example of local empowerment in Britain was the handling of training and enterprise. The Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), and their Scottish

counterpart the LECs, are local agencies which are part-funded by local businesses. Their initial aim was to empower business leaders by giving them responsibility for developing a strategy for Government training. They also potentially gave businesses the opportunity to play a major role in the wider economic development of local areas. The ideals were sound but Bennett et al (1994) report that the TECs had not received as much power as had been promised. As Bennett et al argue due to the economy and other overriding factors, the councils were trammelled to central targets rather than being empowered locally. Boards of the TECs found themselves working as fund allocators rather than developing training strategies. "Business empowerment has become largely a sham" Bennett et al (1994: 314). The problem, here, was that the use of public funds and the involvement of ministers creates a dependency that negates true empowerment, business flair is clipped by public accountability and there is little local flexibility. Perhaps one could equate this with empowerment of employees where the imposition of constraints within which employees must work limits their potential flair and reduces a true feeling of "empowerment".

The final level of empowerment in the political literature is that of the individual. In recent years in the United Kingdom, and other Western countries, the power of the individual has become central to many Conservative Government policies. The advent of consumerism has instilled a "right to choose" ethos into the British public and this was reflected in, for instance, the Citizens' Charter whereby every public service must reach certain standards of service or the customer's money is returned. This power of the consumer was also reflected in the introduction of a voucher scheme for Nursery School places and a Patients' Charter for Children. The example of Patient empowerment is an interesting one. It potentially creates a system of accountability and leads to an improvement in the patients' situation within service delivery procedures. Saltman (1994) focuses on the issue of empowering patients within public health systems in northern Europe. He contends that empowerment is a continuum which is "characterized by the change from moral suasion...through formal political control...to countervailing power" (1994: 203). This final point of the continuum is defined as the ability to control one's own destiny and differs greatly from the request to be heard which is moral suasion. Saltman claimed that it requires changes at the most concrete stage to transform the role of patients to anywhere close

to this furthest position on the continuum. Rather than directly empowering the individual patient, the present system in the United Kingdom of "National Health Service Trusts" might be seen to more closely resemble the second level of empowerment. That is, the introduction of Trusts which work autonomously with NHS grants are locally empowered but they are still essentially under Government control. Like social work, patient empowerment comes up against the reality of financial constraints and the role of experts.

In short, the use of "empowerment" in the political literature can be seen to relate to the existence of, and problems with, Governmental control within a pluralist society. As has been emphasized, empowerment is not the shifting around of a constant amount of power rather it is the creation of more power, as Saltman wrote, "empowerment is not a zero-sum game." (1994: 8). Such an approach would mirror the positive-sum, approach which was proposed by Dunlop (1958). Dunlop perceived power as an exogenous variable to the system rather than traditional labour process theorists who considered power to be endogenous to the relationship between unions and management. This perspective, which centres around a common interest of survival, is reflected in the new unitarism (Provis, 1996) of which the contemporary empowerment initiatives is argued to be a part.

Empowerment: Contemporary management theory

"When I hear the word empowerment, I reach for my gun. It's like new bottles for old wine"

Bernard Taylor, a Professor at Henley Management College (Osbaldeston, 1993)

Through its association with management gurus (Byham, 1988; Peters, 1989), "empowerment" has acquired a buzz-word quality which leads many to use it superficially or ignore it altogether (Clutterbuck, 1994). The discourse which surrounds "Empowerment" may further confuse the definitions which are adopted by the organizational players. Recent commentary by management academics (Legge,

1989; Keenoy, 1990), has suggested that whilst empowerment and HRM are essentially modernist approaches to work, they are postmodernist in their use of discourse. Essentially, therefore, it is argued that the "brilliant ambiguity" (Keenoy) which surrounds HRM and the binary oppositions which the language possess indicates a postmodernist approach. Indeed, in the discussion of empowerment across non-management disciplines, it appears that 'empowerment' has revolutionary connotations, that it is a process by which the oppressed may become free. In this way it transfers an almost Pentecostalist dimension to the term (Ackers and Preston, 1995) in that it suggests that, through the adoption of some intangible spirit, utopian dreams can be realised. It must be seen as interesting that much of the 'evangelical' work in recent management literature uses these somewhat left-wing, radical terms such as "Liberation Management" (Peters, 1992) and "empowerment" to describe right-wing management practices. Hence, the use of such terms presents inherent contradictions which are embedded not only in discourse but also in practice.

Conger and Kanungo see delegation and participation as a set of conditions which may or may not empower the workforce, defining empowerment as, “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (1988: 474). The implication is that empowerment is an end product and that the “process” they describe is essentially a mixture of employee involvement techniques. Self-efficacy is a psychological term which is becoming increasingly popular to describe a person’s belief in their own effectiveness, hence it could be argued that Conger and Kanungo see empowerment as sharing power and information to give employees more conviction in their own effectiveness.

The motivational definitions of empowerment, offered by Conger and Kanungo (1998), imply that the initiative may well be old wine in new bottles, but that the wine may not be Quality Circles or other forms of employee involvement but the ideals of the Quality of Working Life movement which has more humanistic appeal. In this sense, the rhetoric of empowerment appears to represent a move away from defined specific techniques, which acted as mere add-ons to other management policies

(Marchington et al, 1992) towards something which is more far-reaching and deeper. Indeed, the belief that empowerment is directed at feelings of enhancement and self-efficacy implies that management are introducing such policies for the benefit of employees. However, there do appear to be aspects of both empowerment and the Quality of Working Life movement, which cast this assumption into doubt. Firstly, the quality of working life programmes were introduced to reduce the absenteeism and labour turnover characteristic of problematic work groups. The initiatives of the 1990s appear more strategic and follow large structural changes in organizations, such that the aim of empowerment policies in this sense is to make workers more autonomous partly because they have no choice, as the organization becomes more streamlined and the prevalence of middle managers declines, and partly so that reactions to customers can be made more quickly and effectively. So. whilst both policies may be targeted at the development of positive feelings of employees, this is not necessarily for the primary benefit of employees. The use of "evangelical" terms which represent the "hyper-real" (Legge, 1995 referring to Baudrillard) can, through the use of imagery, shift peoples perceptions from the mundane reality - the 'hard' side of HRM to the 'softer' more acceptable side. In this way, actors throughout the organization could use empowerment and HRM as a rhetoric to represent a shift in thinking whilst mundane reality covertly continues in much the same way. This returns one to the importance of management intentions.

What appears to differentiate empowerment from previous management initiatives, is the proposed importance of the management intentions behind the initiative. There is a natural cynicism which surrounds the introduction of many so-called employee involvement techniques, but the fact that “empowerment” appears to offer much more than involvement, appears to enhance this scepticism. The idea of bestowing power upon another or of some transference of the power balance is one which many have seen as integral to empowerment in an organisational context also. In theory, organisational empowerment should be a way of removing oppression but, in practice, it can be seen as reasserting the oppression due to the fact that equity is clearly not managements' primary concern. Tom Peters (1988:453) argues that empowerment accounts for the difference between “letting go” (Which he sees as delegation) and “really letting go” (empowerment). He states that really letting go involves distancing

oneself from the task completely - geographically and psychologically, yet impressing on those who do the tasks the high standards held and the belief that they will complete the task well. Really letting go differs from delegation in that, "the authority granted is real and significant, but it is matched by the psychological pressure to perform up to one's limits and to the highest standards". The work of Thomas and Velthouse (1990) interprets empowerment in terms of the emotional response to work rather than the feeling evoked by management or management practices. Empowerment is defined in terms of intrinsic task motivation and internalised commitment to the task. It is implied here that it is employees' perceptions of what is occurring in the organisation which is central to any theory of empowerment. The perceptions of employees are also prioritised by Parker and Price (1994), who claim that empowerment is merely a perception of control and should be defined as "the belief that one has control (i.e. the belief that one can influence decisions)" (1994:913). They readily adopt perceived control as an interchangeable term for empowerment enforcing their view that empowerment is as much a factor of an employees emotional reactions to it as to the managerial process itself. In short, Parker and Price argue that performance is improved when people think they are in control as it enhances confidence and reduces stress.

The theories outlined above seem to imply that organisations do not need to provide any concrete changes to gain commitment and increase workers' confidence. Bell wrote "the ends of the enterprise remain, but the methods have shifted and the older modes of overt coercion are now replaced by psychological persuasion" (1960:244). Empowerment has emerged in the management literature along with other "buzzwords" such as Business Process Re-engineering, TQM, Management Development and Delayering. They are upheld as panaceas, and writings on empowerment reinforce this "cult" theme. The early talk of empowerment by Tom Peters, a guru who speaks in semi-religious tones, and the book "Zapp!" (Byham, 1988) which refers to the light which radiated from employees as they were empowered, leads us to believe that empowerment, as the Oxford English Dictionary proposed, is something which is "done" to convert others - a management cultural phenomena. Indeed, as Ackers and Preston (1995) wrote, "Some organisations have begun to demand the very soul of their staff as the key to active commitment"

(1995:2). The use of religious metaphors in an organisational setting might be seen as unethical. Ackers and Preston write that "the spiritual domain of the new management is completely internal to the business organisation; it has no higher purpose than to make profit" (1995:28). Hence, they imply that the well-being of the workers has no place in empowerment and certainly no significant role. The idea that manipulation is at the heart of empowerment is difficult to ignore. It would seem, therefore, that empowerment is a contested concept which gains its interpretation from the interests and goals of those who use it. For the workers it promises a re-balance of power and a way of fighting the oppression which they see as existing in organisations, for management it promises a more committed and involved workforce who will take initiatives within constraints which they set and see as important to the profitability and success of the organisation.

The innate subjectivity of empowerment allows these differing expectations to co-exist and to survive. Lukes (1986) found a similar problem when interpreting "power", he said that it was impossible to come up with a definitive answer to the question 'What are we talking about when we talk about power?' and that to search for an answer would be a mistake as the differences between definitions run too deep and that what unites them is too thin and formal. Indeed, Keenoy and Anthony (1992) argue that a universal definition is not needed as, in the case of HRM, the ambiguity of policies are their strength, " messages carried…are more important than the specific devices employed" (1992:235) and that to explain the messages would be to destroy their strength. This may be particularly true considering the religious metaphors discussed above, destroying the mysticism which policies like empowerment hold would lessen their power of conversion - 'belief…is not based upon deconstructing theory or looking for proof, but on faith" (Noon, 1992:29). In the discussion of empowerment across non-management disciplines, it appears that 'empowerment' has revolutionary connotations, that it is a process by which the oppressed may become free.

However, if the ambiguity of empowerment is of any benefit, it may only be short-lived. If we consider the analogy to religion, Ackers and Preston (1995) argue that evangelical religion faces problems of 'backsliding' and 'routinisation' as spirits ebb.

So, one might conclude, if empowerment offers little more than a vague culture change with no permanent or measurable benefits it, too, will fall victim to ebbing spirits. This backsliding may well be accentuated by the breaking down of the psychological contract due to the ambiguity which "empowerment" promotes. The psychological contract (Morrison, 1994) is an emotionally laden, unspoken contract which exists within worker and employer regarding what each desires from the relationship. Related to this are the issues surrounding a low-trust environment as proposed by Fox (1974). Fox argued that when power relations within an organisation are altered it causes a spiral of distrust to occur which he termed the "low trust dynamic". The introduction of empowerment, it is argued here, will build and reinforce differing expectations of the work relationship which will result in strong feelings of resentment and disappointment and the occurrence of this spiralling distrust.

Coming up with innovative ways of working, like the advent of older Quality Circles, which make jobs more efficient seems practical and implies that management have a genuine belief in the credibility of employees' ideas. However, such a policy could also be seen as management using the suggestions of those who know about the job (i.e. those that do the job) without paying them any more and with the possible consequence that it will make the organisation so efficient that they will do themselves and their colleagues out of a job. The catch of empowerment, moreover, is that it combines management's use of the disciplinary "stick" and the incitative "carrot" - hence, although making suggestions may cost workers their jobs, not involving oneself in the empowerment process could damage an employees pay review or promotion prospects.

Even then, despite the request for innovative ideas, Simons (1995) suggested that management must exercise levers of control in a climate of empowerment to harness employees' creativity. Yet, the use of such barriers restricts the supposed freedom which empowerment gave the employees so whilst offering autonomy in one hand, management takes it away with the other. One cannot help feeling that to make assertions which, in practice, cannot be adhered to is more damaging to employees than to never make the assertions in the first place. Indeed, there are some who feel

that, far from offering beneficial effects, empowerment is merely a ‘Trojan Horse’ disguising the further exploitation of workers. As Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) suggests whilst, “empowerment and trust [are the] rhetoric ...the centralization of power and control [are the] reality” (1992:102). The view that empowerment represents an ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’ and hails a return to Tayloristic methods of control has some support (McCardle et al, 1995; Kerfoot and Knights, 1995; Claydon and Doyle, 1994; Panteli and Corbett, 1996) and proposes that, "empowerment results not in a power shift in the organisation, but in employees becoming morally bound to a system of management which enhances their own exploitation" (McArdle et al, 1995:161).

Whilst some argue that empowerment in itself is exploitation, others claim that management's lasting identity with direct control often undermines the potential success of empowerment. For instance, McCabe and Knights (1995), basing their views on a study of an insurance company endeavouring to empower staff through TQM, write that there appears to be a staff acceptance of TQM and that this is partially reflected by "the hierarchical power relations of staff vis-a-vis management which offers staff little choice other than to cooperate" (1995: 38). Yet, they argue against the assumption that this consequence is necessarily a conscious intention of management, as Kerfoot and Knights write, "we regard the management control of employees as an unintended consequence of the development of quality programmes, rather than their direct objective" (1995:221). McArdle et al suggest that, if the above arguments are true, the solution must lie in not just implementing participation practices but accompanying them with "the appropriate developments in the structure of the organisation" (1995: 157). Others, however, are not as generous. They believe that management consciously use empowerment to subvert the workforce and exploit the ideas of employees, seeking their views and specialised knowledge about shop-floor issues with no returnable benefit.

Conclusion

From a review of the use of the term "empowerment" across several disciplines, it would seem that the underlying interpretation of the word is one of mobilising the

oppressed by helping them believe in themselves, increasing their self-efficacy and, hence, motivating them to work towards equality. Indeed, one might further conceptualise that empowerment is both objective and subjective and that the level of the individual is essential for personalising the wider, objective issues. Indeed, Craig and Steinhoff (1990) write that unless individuals perceive a change in their environment then empowerment can not be seen to have taken place: "Individuals or groups that do not perceive that real power has been delegated are not empowered. They may hear the words but...when they see that the behaviour is not consistent with the words they rarely believe that empowerment has occurred" (1990: 50).

From this review, some interesting aspects of empowerment have arisen in different contexts. Firstly, the literature on women brought forward the theory that there are two concepts of empowerment: intellectual and experiential. Secondly, the case of minority groups demonstrated that, even if skills are gained and goals are met through self-knowledge, there is always the danger that attitudes are so deep-rooted that any attempt at empowerment will never be more than superficial. This also appears to follow the theory of a dual concept of empowerment which arose in the women's literature. It is the idea that those in positions of superiority need to encourage the creation of power in the oppressed and not block empowerment through an abuse of their dominant position. The tendency to do otherwise may occur out of fear, indeed in the case of organisational empowerment many managers seem fearful of allowing employees greater freedom. In essence, it is a matter of trust in the intentions of all those involved in the empowerment process. As Friedmann writes, the search for empowerment amongst the oppressed is not a mission to take over but rather to gain equal treatment. "The empowerment they seek is not to seize the state. Their demand is for social justice and a respectful treatment as citizens with equal rights" (1992: 760).

The educational literature returns to the idea that empowerment is both an individual and social process. At the individual level empowerment is said to be substantive, as demonstrated in the case study of the illiterate, "in the process of learning that there are names, the human begins to feel power" (Courts, 1991: 13). Yet, on a more social basis, the fear is that education which is said to be empowering is often manipulated

to reassert the control of the dominant group and is, in that way, symbolic. Empowerment has been adopted frequently in the Community Care literature. The need for empathy was also emphasised here. Rather than merely questioning the users, workers were encouraged to make the user feel that they are the expert of the situation and to ask them what they see as the best way forward. This has particular applications for the case of employee empowerment. If managers demand answers from their employees with the intention of drawing their own conclusions anyway, this process has to be disempowering. In relation to politics, it was claimed that although revolution could bring a dissident group to power it was not necessarily empowering. The literature also supported the idea that power is not a zero-sum game and that by helping the oppressed assume power, the oppressors are actually creating more power in the environment rather than losing any themselves. This is a theory often brought to the attention of apprehensive mangers who fear and resist the concept of empowerment.

The view that exists and which might best form a starting point for consideration of organisational empowerment, is that empowerment is both a process and a goal which acts at the individual level to increase self-efficacy. It allows the formation of dissident groups which individuals, through their increased self-knowledge, have recognised as holding a greater authenticity for them than the dominant culture. In this sense, the aim of empowerment appears to be the gaining of equality through these groups rather than ultimate power and control and, yet, it faces resistance from a fearful and untrusting dominant culture. Under this assumption, Trade Unions would appear to be the dissident groups which strive for equality in the workplace. In the view of Boreham and Hall (1994) a change of status will not come from individual empowerment, which they tend to see as another management practice aimed at invidualising the workplace but through "political unionism". As they see it the collective empowerment of labour, through trade union strength, is much more likely to be able to be effectively deployed in political institutions than in the direct empowerment of individuals at the level of the enterprise labour process" (1994: 314). However, the case study of Greene County demonstrated that political empowerment tends to bring only superficial results failing to tackle the more rigid problems such as attitudes. Unions might do well to adopt the model proposed by Friedmann

(discussed earlier) which seeks empowerment from social, political and psychological sources.

Literature surrounding issues of corporate culture suggest that the use of symbolism to manipulate the social aspect of work is being increasingly adopted in modern organizations (Hopfl et al, 1992). There is a danger that the traumatic experience felt by some manages during their training and the fact that many employees felt "fired up at the time" but found that this enthusiasm faded once they were presented with the mundane reality of organizational life. Indeed, there is evidence from the management literature that such symbolism does not successfully mask the fact that often, nothing has really changed, "in consciously seeking to manage a change of culture, senior managers had manipulated some symbols to signify a new order, but these were insufficient to counterbalance the range of signs which persuaded the sceptical that things were pretty much the same" (Storey, 1992:201). However, use of ambiguous terms and the evangelical connotations which the policies contain, could actually a blockage to the success of empowerment on the shop floor. The fact that empowerment has emerged as a contested concept, presents organizations with the opportunity to use such a term to create instant ambiguity. The four, divergent definitions of the term given by the Oxford English Dictionary and the use of the term across different disciplines, suggests that it is essentially a word from which opposing definitions can generated. Could empowerment create false expectations due to the differing interpretations which employees bring to work? Our review of empowerment across non-management disciplines suggested that, in other circumstances, empowerment represents an overcoming of oppression and a removal of issues of power and status. It is suggested here, that managers are misguided in their expropriation of left-wing terminology and utopian language. By using such terms to "symbolise" their change of culture, organizations are in danger of creating expectations of the policy which they simply cannot meet. As Willmott writes, "in the absence of a major shift in power relations, it is probable that empowerment' will be experienced and assessed as a patronising act of false charity bestowed upon employees" (1995: 93).

That the ambiguity which characterises empowerment allows management to take an "off the shelf" concept and apply it to their own organisational needs. Therefore, empowerment is a floating concept which means different things in different organizations and, further, means different things to different people within those organisations. Both management and employees interpret empowerment from their own viewpoints to suit their own needs and build up expectations of what the programme will bring. For management, empowerment promises a more committed and involved workforce who are willing to take responsibility at lower levels , whilst for employees empowerment pledges autonomy and the ability to move to a more equitable position within their organization. The failure of these expectations to rarely share either similar intentions or goals means that the psychological contract between manager and worker could fail, provoking feelings of distrust on both sides (Fox, 1974). This acknowledgement that actors within the organizations take their own definitions of empowerment from an essentially ambiguous concept, highlights the variation of attitudes and values which individuals bring to the workplace. Yet, Provis (1996) suggests that new management techniques such as empowerment are based on unitarist assumptions, "that every work organization is an integrated and harmonious whole existing for a common purpose" (Farnham & Pimlott, 1990:4). Hence, these policies are being introduced with assumption that everyone holds similar interests and values within the organization. Not only does this not account for differences between management and employees, which were clearly visible throughout the organizations being studied, but also differences amongst employees and managers. Indeed, rather than the assumption of orthodox labour process theory and classical economics that management is a single, unified agent, united behind policies such as empowerment; or the assumption of pure cognitive or behavioural psychology that all employees will react in similar ways to the same stimuli such as empowering practices, we would suggest that the impact of social factors on all the actors within organizations brings differing reactions and hence this challenges the unitary assumption on which the initiative was designed.

The issue of empowerment in the workplace involves the consideration of objective and subjective, individual and collective issues. Is the aim of management really one of empowerment or of oppression? Indeed, Willmott (1993) argues that management

secure control of employees through “double-think”, that is that organizations lead employees to believe that by adhering to corporate values they will enjoy greater autonomy. Hence, if management are not truly altruistic in their motives and resist ‘real’ empowerment, will initiatives only achieve results at the transitional stage, where intellectual empowerment does not equal experiential empowerment and employees are not, in terms of the definitions used in the non-management literature, empowered? This paper has set out the arguments which surround the conceptualization of empowerment. It is hoped that so as to set empowerment in its management context and allow us to appreciate, based on this context, the theories and debates which lie behind the definitions of empowerment which individual organizations choose to make.

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