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# Rethinking Empowerment: Theories of Power and the Potential for Emancipatory Praxis

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# Rethinking Empowerment: Theories of Power and the Potential for Emancipatory Praxis

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**Abstract**: In this paper, we make the case that "empowerment" is still a concept which requires closer scrutiny, for both practical and theoretical reasons. Building on critiques of empowerment and on calls to more consciously address the power relations inherent in adult education, we lay the groundwork for a practical theory of action whereby education practitioners and researchers can work towards salvaging empowerment's emancipatory potential.

In a dialogue between Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, the issue of empowerment arises. When Shor asks if a dialogic physics course empowers students, Freire replies:

> Yes … but it is interesting to me how people in the United States are so preoccupied in using the word and concept "empowerment." There is some reason in this, some meaning in it. … I wish I could better express the feeling deep inside me about this desire to use the word "empowerment." (Shor & Freire, 1984, p. 108)

The publication in English of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) was a watershed event for audiences interested in investigating the manifold intersections of power and education. Largely as a result of Freire's work, the terms empower, empowering, and empowerment have frequently been invoked in educational practice and research (Gadotti, 1994). The empowerment lexicon has grown over time. Yet the concept's ubiquity is troubling, largely because power has often ironically been omitted from discussions of empowerment.

Concurrent with empowerment's ascendancy, the construct's mercurial nature has drawn criticism from some educators and education researchers. Specific critiques occur on two levels: some point to the danger of allowing empowerment to be co-opted in neoliberal discourse, while others warn of the facile, unreflective use of empowerment as a hollow buzzword by leftist educators (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1992; Troyna, 1994). As an under-theorized concept, there is a risk that empowerment is reified and even fetishized, impeding its intellectual and emancipatory potential. Troyna has gone so far as to propose "that those who are persuaded by 'conviction research' should abandon use of the term 'empowerment' (and all that it implies)" (1994, p. 3). Another critique focusing specifically on adult education is provided by Inglis (1997), who draws the distinction between empowering and emancipatory education. His central tenet is that "empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power" (Inglis, 1997, p. 4). Why, then—more than fifteen years after Inglis, Troyna, and others resoundingly critiqued the term—is empowerment still in need of further analysis?

We present a rationale for revisiting the empowerment debates of the 1990s based on evidence of the continued proliferation and theoretic slippage of empowerment, juxtaposed with

a review of the critiques of empowerment and the apparently ignored arguments therein. Then, we attempt to answer the calls made by Gore (1992), Troyna (1994), and Inglis (1997), who all emphasize the need for more explicit connections between empowerment and social theories of power. We propose ways in which the vast body of theoretical work on power can become more meaningfully integrated into the discourses of empowerment in adult education. As such, this is a continuation of the work of Cervero and Wilson (2001), Nesbit and Wilson (2003), and Wilson and Nesbit (2005). We hope to contribute to answering their call "to identify and understand the presence of power, how it works in the work of adult education, and what its consequences are both for the practical work we do as educators as well as how we theorize that practical work" (Wilson & Nesbit, 2005, unpaginated).

### A Rationale for (Re-)Rethinking "Empowerment"

Empowerment, in one form or another, is alive and well. A keyword search of the Social Sciences Citation Index of the Web of Science, using the search terms "empower" and "education" returns 2,521 articles. The number of such articles has grown exponentially since the year 1970. The articles are found in journals covering topics as diverse as social work, nursing, community psychology, political theory, and international development. Yet all thirteen articles in this category published in 1990 or earlier are found in educational journals, such as *Teachers College Record*, *Harvard Educational Review*, and *Adult Education Quarterly*. This suggests a marked proliferation and dissemination of the assumed links between education and empowerment across disciplinary bounds in the past twenty years, a move which, evocative of Bernstein's concept of recontextualizing fields (1990), is likely to have been accompanied by theoretical slippage.

In addition to the proliferation of empowerment studies, there is evidence that organizations that guide education practice in a variety of contexts continue to employ ideas of empowerment in disparate ways. A search of the UNESCO website reveals programs linking empowerment with media, literacy, economic opportunities for women, traditional crafts, information and communication technologies, and "good science and technology practices" (UNESCO, n.d.). A similar search of US Department of Education documents returns programs for parents of children with special needs, grants going to "empowerment zones and enterprise communities," independent living for senior citizens and persons living with disabilities, and a law dictating accountability requirements for struggling school districts (US Department of Education, n.d.). This last example, in particular, is empirical fodder for critics of empowerment who decry the concept's co-optation in neoliberal managerial discourses (James, 1999). The rampant dissemination of empowerment evinced above indicates a greater need than ever to reassess uses of empowerment in adult education discourses—the premise of this paper.

We have two overlapping areas of concern, one theoretical and the other practical. According to Lankshear, "Empowerment is … in danger of losing its theoretical and practical force" (1994, p. 163). The theoretical concern is that the evolutionary lineage of empowerment as a concept has divaricated and been subtly waylaid, obfuscating its initial emancipatory import; the related practical concern is that educators and education researchers who use the concept may do so in ways which ignore (and could be complicit in perpetuating) underlying contentious power relations in the lives of purported beneficiaries. By foregrounding how the term is used (and misused), and by more prominently inserting conceptions of power into discourses of empowerment, we hope this paper will contribute to a larger epistemic and political project of salvaging empowerment's emancipatory potential.

**Revisiting the Empowerment Debates of the 1990s**

Before turning to social theories of power and their potentially elucidating applications in adult education, we offer a brief overview of the central points made by critics of empowerment who were most vocal in the 1990s. Freire is generally considered to be the progenitor of empowerment in education discourse (Gadotti, 1994; McLaren, 1994). One of the earliest published articles on empowerment in education recounts an application of Freire's approach to a new context, health education (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Yet he did not agree with how the idea developed in the US. Empowerment as conceived by Freire involves a process of dialogic "conscientization" where teachers and learners together read "the word and the world" (Freire, 1970). His ideas are rooted in critical theory and Neo-Marxism and influenced by Fanon's notions of "colonization of the mind;" thus he was interested in promoting both consciousness-raising *and* material changes to address issues of inequality and oppression (Gadotti, 1994).

Herein lies a major difference between what Kanpol (1999) calls "traditional empowerment" and "critical empowerment" (pp. 52-53). Yet Freire and his peers discussed limitations to their theories which are similar in tenor to those voiced by Ellsworth, Gore, and Troyna. Lankshear identifies "the capacity of 'the dominant class' to recuperate concepts like empowerment, adapt them to social demands, and thereby transform them into so much 'hollow, nominal, and empty terminology'" (1994, p. 164). Reflexively, he also convicts "educational theorists and practitioners committed to the liberatory ideal of authentic education" for their role in "devaluing the currency of empowerment" (Lankshear, 1994, p. 164). This occurs through "promiscuous use [of empowerment] in exercises of theoretical painting by numbers" (Lankshear, 1994, p.164) and by treating the concept as a magic bullet.

Ellsworth (1989), Troyna (1994), and Gore (1992) reinforce these critiques. According to Ellsworth (1989), the approach to empowerment in critical pedagogy "treats the symptoms but leaves the disease unnamed and untouched" (p. 306). She outlines three strategies employed by proponents of critical pedagogy which ostensibly share, give, or redistribute power to learners, all of which strike her as inadequate: (1) mutual reflective examination by teacher and student, which she dismisses as problematically over-dependent on rationalism; (2) re-learning of the objects of study by the teacher as she or he learns them with the student—which is still explicitly designed to bring the student's understanding "up" to the level of the teacher, leaving "the implied superiority of the teacher's understanding … unproblematized and untheorized" (p. 307); and (3) acknowledgment of the inevitably directive and authoritarian nature of education and judgment of acceptable and unacceptable power imbalances, where "the question 'empowerment for what' becomes the final arbiter of a teacher's use or misuse of authority" (p. 307). The problem with this third strategy, according to Ellsworth, is that critical pedagogues tend to answer that final question "in ahistorical and depoliticized abstractions" (p. 307). She claims that defining empowerment in broad humanist terms (as "a capacity to act effectively") interrupts its ability to challenge social or political positions, institutions, or groups.

Troyna (1994) contributes to a wider political project aimed at challenging the capturing of language of the Left by governments of the Right for contradictory purposes. He cites a speech by John Major in which empowerment is equated with shared choice and responsibility in "the next phase of Conservatism." Troyna interrogates the notion that "giving voice" to a student is synonymous with "empowering" her or him. Echoing a frequently repeated critique of adult education (Nesbit, 1998), Troyna likens empowerment to a cuckoo, "raiding a number of

theoretical paradigms, of which the following figure most prominently" (1994, p. 15): critical theory, action research, Freirian pedagogy, cooperative inquiry, feminist perspectives, and antiracist perspectives. As we contend below, this bird tends to avoid social theories of power. Gore (1992) focuses her analysis on the politics of empowerment within discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy. Her major concern "stems from conceptions of the agent of empowerment" (p. 61). Using Foucault's concept of "regime of truth," Gore rejects conceptions of power as property, which then "points to a rethinking of empowerment as the exercise of power in an attempt to help others exercise power" (1992, p. 69). The resulting emphasis on power as action leads her to call for more explicit discussion of the contexts in which and actions by which empowerment is to occur. These critiques and debates index the need to step back from discussions of empowerment to ask what we even mean when we speak of (or imply) "power."

### You Can't Spell "Empowerment" Without "Power"

Following Wilson and Nesbit (2005), a generative yet oddly rare way to interrogate empowerment is to ask: "Where is the power?"—a question that works both in the sense of analyzing how power flows through ostensibly empowering social relations, and in the sense of assessing the role of social theories of power in empowerment discourses. The question is not new: "Why is power not included in the lexicon of educators? The idea of power has been more completely neglected in education studies than in any other discipline of fundamental social interest … Indeed, one is more likely to hear singing in a bank than serious talk of power in relation to education" (Nyberg, 1981, p. 63). For empirical support, Nyberg provides an annotated bibliography of seven books which have "power" and "education" in their titles, yet which do not even speak directly about what power is; some don't even have power in the index! While some domains of education discourse have seen an upswing in considerations of power in the thirty years since Nyberg, adult education is not one of them: "Because most theorists and many practitioners tend to ignore or deplore the workings of power in practice and theory, power continues to be problematic. Those adult education theorists who do tend to the problem of power too often do so either presumptively (assuming we all know what power is—when we truly do not) or in under-theorized ways" (Wilson & Nesbit, 2005, unpaginated). The result is a technical-rationalistic approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating adult education—a fairly sure way to reproduce unjust existing power relations.

Below, we present a synthesis of the central arguments of a handful of texts which analyze and interpret a wide array of social theories of power. These texts are pertinent for adult educators and education researchers because they explore how philosophical accounts of power can be brought to bear in the complex particularities inherent to the cultural practice of education in late modernity (or postmodernity.) Isaac (1992) offers a clear presentation of the "three faces of power" debate as well as a realist critique of that debate. Briefly, the three faces are: power (1) as a causal relationship between the behaviors of two agents, causality being understood as constant conjunction; (2) as nondecision, a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker—not simply interaction, but limitations on interaction; and (3) interests—power as averting conflict and grievance by influencing, shaping, and determining the perceptions and preferences of others.

Like Isaac, Stewart (2001) goes beyond these three faces and looks especially closely at Giddens, Foucault, Lyotard, Habermas, and Arendt in order to problematize the dominant tradition of power analysis which equates power with domination. He notes that from this dominant standpoint, "the very *possibility* of a political theory and practice concerned with

processes of empowerment is precluded" (p. 6, emphasis in the original). Other helpful texts in this analysis are Cheater (1999) and Tew (2002). Tew defines power as "a *social relation* that *either opens up or closes off* opportunities for individuals or social groups" (2002, p. 165, emphasis in the original). Cheater states:

> The mystifying rhetoric of empowerment as expansible, vocal power is the offspring of an optimistic postmodernism linked to democratic and negotiated organisational structures. ... Conceptualising power as postmodern, warm-fuzzy, expansible not only conceals its hard edges; this cloak of opacity also discourages nasty questions of who benefits and how, and runs the danger of collapsing objectives, processes and outcomes alike into an undifferentiated rhetorical empowerment. (1999, p. 7)

Because we lack the space in this paper to delve into the primary sources mentioned above, and because this is terrain which has been mapped before at previous AERC conferences, we draw here on the classificatory and explicatory work of Wilson and Nesbit. They lay out a sort of evolutionary epistemology of power, sketching four broad traditions of theorizing power: behaviorist, communicative, decentered, and realist (Wilson & Nesbit, 2005). Permeating all of these traditions is the nature of the relationship of individuals to society, and the dialectic of structure and agency. Wilson and Nesbit offer another classificatory scheme of four interpretive traditions to describe this theme: agentic, structuralist, agentic-structuralist intergration, and social process. Most approaches to adult education are predominately agentic; they have strong personal and pragmatic foci and the end goal is to effect change (i.e., empowerment) for individual learners. As Wilson and Kiely point out, this is problematic because "perspectives may shift and some may also 'successfully reintegrate' into society, but the status quo will likely remain unchallenged, leaving fundamental questions regarding systemic distortions and inequities in late capitalism, patriarchy, and the colonization of the lifeworld unaddressed" (2002, unpaginated).

Hence, we appreciate and see the need to further incorporate Foucault's (1980) notion of "capillaries of power," as well as Giddens' (1979) and Bordieu's (1977) notions of power (see Nesbit and Wilson, 2003) as a complex social force that exists in an imbricated network of overlapping, shifting, and contested relationships, which both constitute and are constituted by social structures. Where does this leave us as adult education researchers and practitioners? Searching for a theory of practical action of empowerment derived from these social theories of power. Isaac states, "Theories of power … should be conceived as interpretative models, developed by social scientists as submitted to the rigors of critical consideration, about social structures which shape human action and distribute the capacities to act among social agents" (1987, p. 75).

## Conclusion: To Revive a Depleted Concept

The types of analyses presented briefly above—readmitting power into discussions of empowerment—are a necessary step in moving towards a praxis of emancipatory adult education. In the absence of a concerted effort to explicate what role theories of power can, do, and should play in empowerment discourse, we agree with critics like Troyna, who believes "Freire's innovative work has been used by others in an unreconstructed and unreflective way" (1994, p. 18). Empowerment rhetoric continues to proliferate in ways which are "at best naïve, at worst, deceitful" (Troyna, 1994, p. 9). Thus we agree with Freire who said, "In fact, it would be

good if we carried out a type of investigation among ourselves on the groups of concepts that have been depleted, in order to experience them and revive them, really putting them into practice" (Escobar, 1994, p. 74). We hope this paper is one step towards such an investigation.

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