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Empowerment and Programs Designed to Address Domestic Violence

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Programs designed to address domestic violence often name empowerment of women as a major program goal. However, programs do not necessarily define what empowerment for survivors of domestic violence entails. This review examines the literature on empowerment, including characteristics of an empowerment process and critiques of empowerment. Diversity of goals for empowerment and differences in access to resources for women experiencing domestic violence are explored as two major factors that should inform program development. Recommendations are offered for developing programs to address domestic violence that support women engaged in an empowerment process.

Keywords: *domestic violence programs; empowerment*

Empowerment for women is a major goal within the mainstream domestic violence movement. But what is empowerment? During the past 20 years, the mainstream movement to end violence against women has created a nationwide system of service programs for women facing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse from their intimate partners. Such abuse is commonly referred to as domestic violence and I use that phrase in this note. Often, domestic violence programs (hereafter referred to as programs) write mission statements that name "empowerment" as a major goal of services. For instance, in 2004 the Chicago Abused Women Coalition's (CAWC) mission statement read, "Through our self-help philosophy, we strive to empower women so they can live free of domestic violence" (CAWC, n.d.). However, programs do not necessarily define what "empowerment" for battered women entails. Rather, they list services provided to empower women. CAWC continued its mission statement as follows: "We accomplish this [empowerment] by providing abused women and their children with support services, including safe, violence free shelter, counseling, advocacy, and a 24 hour hotline" (CAWC, n.d.). Many programs provide services like those described by CAWC, most often including some combination of legal advocacy, emergency shelter, and counseling. Rather than defining empowerment explicitly, programs seem to equate empowerment with advocacy, the work done by staff on behalf of victims (McDermott & Garofalo, 2004).

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Programs intend to empower women who have had freedoms taken away in the context of abuse by giving them choices. But the set of choices that programs present to victims is often limited by the dominant discourse and practice in the domestic violence movement. Every woman who engages with mainstream programs is met by the same general set of beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Although some women may benefit from these practices, many women may find the movement lacking. In some cases, programs may disempower women (McDermott & Garofalo, 2004).

If programs wish to empower women, they should be grounded in a clear conceptualization of empowerment, rather than assuming that programs are empowering (McDermott & Garofalo, 2004). However, there does not seem to be a definition for empowerment that currently guides the movement. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the ways in which programs might help some women, leave some without help, and cause harm to others (McDermott & Garofalo, 2004). A clearer description of empowerment could inspire new directions for creating ways to address domestic violence. Programs may go beyond the present direct services and advocacy they provide and create new interventions ranging from alternate approaches, to individual-level advocacy, to community-level change efforts.

Here I present recommendations for an empowerment process that could help guide the development of new programs designed to address domestic violence. I begin by reviewing existing conceptualizations of empowerment. Next, I review critiques of the way empowerment has been understood to date, and I provide an analysis of these critiques to frame my recommendations for programs that support women's own empowerment processes.

A Review of Empowerment

Empowerment has been defined within community psychology as "a process . . . by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs" (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122) and is a key concept within the field. Individuals, groups, and organizations can all engage in an empowerment process (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment may be experienced as either a perceived sense of control or an actual increase in control over relevant resources (Rappaport, 1987). More broadly, it may signify an understanding of and participation in activities needed to create social and political change (Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000). Although empowerment has been defined as a process, no one has offered a clear articulation of what that process might look like. Instead, researchers identify characteristics of empowerment.

For instance, research indicates that empowerment may look different depending on individual differences as well as differences in contexts (Foster-Fishman, Salem, Chibnall, Legler, & Yapchai, 1998). What "sense of control" means may vary, even within the same context. One person may find that a change in context requires a

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new means for gaining control (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998). Programs designed to address domestic violence should be flexible to accommodate differences in individuals and contexts.

Researchers have identified stages often associated with empowerment (Kieffer, 1984; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Many who engage in an empowerment process begin from a place of powerlessness characterized by internalized devaluation and limited access to resources (Kieffer, 1984). At this stage, people tend to accept their situation as the way things are, or may blame themselves for their circumstances (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1997). However, through consciousness raising (Serrano-García, 1984), people may recognize the need for a more just distribution of resources. An empowerment process may involve development of "critical awareness," which is an understanding of the sociopolitical forces affecting access to resources (Kieffer, 1984; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000). Through critical awareness, a person is able to understand why and how barriers to resources have been constructed. With this knowledge, people may create goals for change and achieve those goals (Kieffer, 1984). Once begun, the empowerment process may go on indefinitely because the effects of oppression are systematic and pervasive, and each new moment of understanding may lead to new goals (Kieffer, 1984). Programs designed to address domestic violence may want to include development of critical awareness as a key program element to support women throughout their empowerment processes.

Empowerment processes may be grounded in the "three pillars of empowerment" (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). They are self-determination, distributive justice, and collaborative and democratic participation. Self-determination describes the overarching goal of an empowerment process. People should be able to set goals and have access to the resources necessary to achieve their goals. Included in this is the ability to develop a chosen personal identity without fear of discrimination (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Empowerment processes should lead to distributive justice, which is a social condition in which both work and profit from work are equally distributed across and within communities (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). To achieve these goals and support empowerment processes, programs designed to address domestic violence should use a collaborative and democratic approach that values and involves the skills and concerns of all participants (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994).

The insights from literature on empowerment described above should guide the development of new programs for women experiencing domestic violence. First, empowerment should not be viewed as an outcome of services, as it is often viewed within domestic violence practice. Empowerment should be seen as a process in which women themselves engage. Through engaging in the process, women may gain a sense of control or mastery over their affairs. The process may look different depending on individual characteristics and variations in context. However, the process should be concerned with developing access to needed resources. This may begin with consciousness raising or development of critical awareness. For programs

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designed to address domestic violence, goals and actions should be grounded in the three pillars of empowerment: self-determination, distributive justice, and collaborative and democratic participation.

Critiques of Empowerment

Several researchers have raised concerns regarding the effectiveness or desirability of empowerment in different contexts. For instance, programs designed to empower tend to focus on gaining power for individuals. This goal may be undesirable in communities that value interdependence or communion (Riger, 1993). In some cases, behaving as an empowered individual may lead to negative consequences for members of oppressed groups. One author (Fine, 1989) describes her work with a young African American woman who had just been gang-raped. Many rape crisis workers and domestic violence advocates are trained from an empowerment framework that encourages women to take control of their lives after being raped or abused. Customarily, taking control may involve actions such as telling family members, engaging police, or seeing a counselor. For some women, engaging in these types of actions represents active engagement with available resources for support. However, none of these empowering acts was feasible for this woman (Fine, 1989). Her family did not have the emotional or financial resources to support her. The police, based on their past histories of racist behavior, could not be trusted to assist. Counselors could do nothing to change the circumstances of her life as a member of an impoverished and oppressed community. In the case of this woman, taking control involved rejecting all of the options presented to her rather than acting as an "empowered" woman (Fine, 1989).

Others have critiqued empowerment in terms of how people become empowered, specifically, the notion of one group empowering another (Gruber & Trickett, 1987; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000). A study conducted in an alternative public high school (Gruber & Trickett, 1987) reveals several problems inherent in this process. In this study, empowerment is defined as "real decision-making power" (p. 354) and is reflected in the creation of a governing body for the school that involved parents, students, and teachers. Teachers in the school, who had a great deal of power in all aspects of the school's functioning, wanted to create a more egalitarian setting where parents and students had equal control of the school. Although well intentioned, the governing body failed to create the desired environment. Students and parents did not have equal access to resources such as information, experience, skills, and daily interaction to be able to have any real influence over decisions. Because of this resource gap, students and parents were not empowered (Gruber & Trickett, 1987). Good intentions on the part of one resource-rich group do not necessarily lead to empowerment for those who do not share the same access to resources.

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It is also unclear if programs designed to empower others are capable of creating any real change in oppressive systems or environments. Much of the research on empowerment measures a person's sense of empowerment rather than actual increases in power (Riger, 1993). In some cases, programs may settle for an increase in people's sense of empowerment because they are unwilling or unable to challenge those who control resources (Serrano-García, 1984). Programs designed to empower should consider whether simply increasing a person's sense of control over their lives is sufficient. When the ultimate goal of the program is to make change in society—for example, ending domestic violence—programs may need to work harder to assess the actual changes that have occurred in women's lives as a result of the program activities.

The critiques of empowerment described here should inform the development of new programs designed to address domestic violence. Attention should be paid to the goals of an empowerment process for women. Program goals should be shaped by women's own values and priorities and should reflect the limitations to resource access placed on them by society. Programs must acknowledge that a woman who places her family's well-being before her own, or rejects options laid in front of her because they will not work for her circumstances, may still be engaging in an empowerment process.

In addition, programs that work with women may need to change the way they view their own role in empowerment. Programs cannot and should not try to empower women. Women who engage in an empowerment process should set their own goals and determine what kinds of resources would be helpful to them in reaching these goals. Programs may help women access these resources. In this way, programs may play a vital role in supporting a woman's empowerment process.

Finally, programs designed to address domestic violence should be clear about the level of impact they are having on women involved in programs. Do program activities lead primarily to changes at the psychological level? Is the woman actually safer? Does she have more control in her life? Have conditions in her family, community, culture, or country changed in such a way that she is able to maintain her safety? These questions are often difficult to answer. However, the answers may prove to be essential indicators of the effectiveness of a program to address domestic violence.

Addressing Criticisms of Empowerment

The criticisms and examples described above provide valuable insight into the pitfalls of developing programs designed to empower. Here, I highlight two key issues that tie these critiques together: (a) diversity of goals for empowerment and (b) differences in access to resources for those engaged in an empowerment process. In this section, I explore these two issues as they apply to empowerment for women experiencing domestic violence.

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Diversity of Goals

Individuals, groups, and organizations are shaped by innumerable contextual factors (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994). As such, corresponding goals for empowerment, resources identified as necessary for reaching goals, and means for accessing those resources may all vary. Women from communities that value independence and autonomy may engage in an empowerment process that looks very different from that of women who thrive on interdependence (Cross, 1998; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999).

Within any community, there may be groups or individuals whose values, needs, and experiences differ from the larger group. Although women who experience domestic violence may share certain experiences, their lives may differ in many ways. For ethnic minority women experiencing domestic violence, differences in family structure, immigration status, acculturation, and histories of oppression may result in varying goals within an empowerment process (Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004). Empowerment processes should reflect the values and needs of women or, in some cases, their communities. Values may vary depending on the culture of origin; needs may be determined by the sociopolitical environment within which the woman or community is nested.

Access to Resources

Here resources are defined as "actual or potential means for achieving one's goal" (Freund & Riediger, 2001, p. 373). For example, a shelter may be a resource to a woman who wants to be safe from abuse. However, for some women, a shelter may be inaccessible because of its location or lack of appropriate facilities, such as wheelchair-accessible bathrooms. Instead of calling a shelter, these women may turn to local resources for safety such as family, friends, or religious institutions. It is important to acknowledge that different groups attempting to engage together in an empowering process do not necessarily have access to all of the same resources (Gruber & Trickett, 1987). Each person engaged in an empowerment process should be valued, share indigenous resources, and develop new resources as needed (Gruber & Trickett, 1987).

Appropriate and available resources should be defined by the individual. Sociopolitical climate can restrict access to some resources that programs identify as important (Fine, 1989). In the case of the rape survivor described earlier, racism and poverty directly affected the survivor's ability to access resources the agency suggested were needed for her to be "empowered." However, the survivor may have been engaging in her own empowerment process by accessing resources available within the constraints of her environment (Fine, 1989). For instance, she may have turned to a pastor at her church for support and counseling. She may have joined with other women in her community to strategize about how to make the streets safer

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for women. She may have organized with others to revitalize her community, thus increasing access to resources for everyone involved (Kasturirangan et al., 2004).

Attempts at empowerment that do not include a comprehensive understanding of the multiple ways in which access to resources can be limited are unlikely to produce a sense of control or lead to realization of goals. For some women, including the rape survivor described above (Fine, 1989), limited access to resources may be the result of oppressive societal forces. Young (2000) describes five ways that people may experience oppression from larger social systems: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

The first three oppressive forces are related to labor. For an *exploited* group, the oppressive society benefits from their labor whereas group members struggle to access necessary resources. *Marginalized* groups are excluded from participating in the established workforce or economic system and, therefore, are unable to benefit from this system. *Powerless* groups may participate in and reap benefits from the workforce but have no authority over the conditions under which they work and live (Young, 2000). Access to labor may have a major impact on women's responses to domestic violence and should be considered when developing programs to address domestic violence.

The last two mechanisms of oppression assert control in ways not necessarily related to labor. *Cultural imperialism* devalues the qualities and characteristics of nondominant groups, forcing group members to engage with and adopt the cultures and practices of the dominant group to survive in and negotiate existing social systems. *Systematic violence* may be used as a mechanism to discourage group members from accessing needed resources. Because the occurrence of violence cannot be predicted, members of oppressed groups often find themselves in a permanent state of vigilance, making it difficult for them to set goals, let alone access resources needed to achieve those goals (Young, 2000). Both cultural imperialism and experiences of systemic violence (e.g., police brutality, gay bashing) can shape women's responses to domestic violence and may influence their goals and actions within an empowerment process.

Although any one of these mechanisms alone is enough to limit access to resources, many oppressed groups experience more than one simultaneously (Young, 2000). In addition, these mechanisms of oppression and discrimination may occur at varying levels of the sociopolitical environment. Group members may experience discrimination and the resulting barriers to resource access from individuals, institutions, or from the system as a whole (Pincus, 2000). In determining limitations to resource access, it may be important to explore both how barriers are occurring (marginalization, exploitation) and at what level of the system (individual, institutional, structural) to develop strategies for improving access.

Women who experience violence are not a homogenous group. Each woman carries her own individual strengths and weaknesses, and each woman may be granted or denied access to resources in a variety of ways depending on her context. Because

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of this, an empowerment process must be flexible and should allow women to draw on their own sources of strength and access to resources. Programs designed to address domestic violence must consider these variations in women's access to resources to be supportive to women engaging in an empowerment process.

Application to Domestic Violence

For women who experience domestic violence, goals and actions within an empowerment process should be shaped by their own values. Values are rooted in individual personality and culture. In the current domestic violence movement, the goals and actions that are designed to empower women are shaped by the dominant discourse on domestic violence. In some cases, these goals and actions may not match the values of the women they try to serve. Programs that support empowerment processes must be shaped by an understanding of differences in and barriers to resource access for women who experience violence. The current domestic violence movement views gender violence as the main culprit in women's limited resources. However, for many women, gender violence may be only one of several oppressive mechanisms that limit access to resources. Women experiencing oppression based on race, class, sexual orientation, ability, or other forms of oppression may not decide to address gender violence as the first goal in their empowerment process. Those who do identify ending gender violence as a goal may choose strategies for ending violence that reflect their own values rather than the values espoused by the movement.

Recommendations for Programs

The recommendations grow from several themes found in the literature discussed in this note. First, programs designed to address domestic violence should acknowledge that empowerment does not occur as the result of a service or particular event. Being empowered does not imply definitive success, that is, leaving the abuser. Rather, empowered individuals (or individuals with their communities) engage in a process of goal setting, assessment, inquiry, analysis, and action that may lead to self-determination and distributive justice.

Programs designed to address domestic violence may support empowered individuals by providing access to resources associated with a variety of goals and standing with them in defending positive changes in the culture as their energy wanes. Empowerment is a continuous, repeating process. Women may not achieve actual increases in access to resources right away. Resistance or backlash from those who control access to resources may require a great deal of time and energy to overcome. However, individual-, community-, or societal-level changes may still be occurring as empowered individuals begin to affect cultural norms and implement structural changes.

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Programs designed to address domestic violence should see gender oppression as one of several oppressive forces that shape women's lives and work to end these other forms of oppression as they attempt to combat domestic violence. A major goal of the empowerment process is distributive justice. For some women, gender violence may not be the only form of injustice she experiences nor her main priority. In an empowerment process, women may prioritize goals related to other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, heterosexism, or ableism. Once goals are established, women can realistically determine what resources they might need to achieve these goals and barriers to resource access.

Programs designed to address domestic violence may include spaces for women to gather together and engage in consciousness-raising activities that value each woman's perspective and promote growth. In an empowerment process, the development of critical awareness and consciousness raising are valuable mechanisms for women to understand the way that societal forces have contributed to their experiences with violence. Critical awareness minimizes self-blame and may lead to development of strategies to end violence that promote distributive justice and produce actual changes in resource access. The empowerment process may lead to a cycle of liberation (Harro, 2000) or a "liberatory consciousness" (Love, 2000, p. 470) in which a woman is aware of oppressive societal forces, takes intentional action to overcome these forces, and maintains a belief in the possibility for change (Love, 2000).

Programs should be able to work with a woman's own goals and values. Empowered women will determine their own goals and appropriate actions based on personal and cultural values. Through self-determination, women may develop their own understanding of their experiences and prioritize goals that reflect their own values and realities. For some women, participation in an empowerment process may depend on the participation of a family or community in that same process.

Programs designed to address domestic violence should see the community as a vital ally in the effort to make social change instead of seeing it solely as the context within which violence has taken place. Women and communities engaged in an empowerment process may choose to use a collaborative and democratic approach to change. A woman may draw on resources within her community and include a phase of empowerment for community input. Women engaged in empowerment together with their communities may participate in the development and implementation of new programs.

Conclusion

Programs designed to address domestic violence do not, in and of themselves, empower women. Rather, women may turn to programs as a resource at various

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stages of the empowerment process. Women may need support as they set goals. In addition to providing counseling services for individual women, programs may provide a space for women to come together and discuss goals with other women experiencing violence, or may serve as a sounding board for women as they think through different goals. Once women have identified resources needed to achieve certain goals, programs may be able to provide those resources, such as childcare, transportation, or meeting space, for a woman who wants to spend time discussing violence with others in her community. At each stage of the process, programs that remain flexible and value self-determination, distributive justice, and collaborative and democratic processes can be a major source of support to women.

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