

Empowerment

By Sabrina Nichol, Kent State University (Peace and Conflict Studies major)

The term 'empowerment' has been increasingly used in modern social movements, such as Black Lives Matter and voting rights. Although the word has been widely used in activism for social movements, it has multiple definitions and uses. An adequate understanding of the term is necessary in order for an individual to identify their strengths and capacities and use them to address their concerns.

Definition:

Empowerment is the process of obtaining the [power](#), right, or authority to do something. It is a state of being that allows people to take action and gain control of their own lives and can translate into the way they can take control in their communities and in their society.

Empowerment has the ability to foster power in people that they can use to transform their personal life and is one way they can interact with their community by acting on issues of their concern.

Significance:

Empowerment acknowledges individual strengths and competencies necessary for promoting social change. The empowerment of marginalized groups within a social structure enables individuals to participate in their communities, societies and government in order to address issues of their concern. It is based on mutual respect and diverse perspectives. Empowerment at its core is dependent on the idea that power can change and expand. An individual or group of individuals cannot obtain the power to do something unless they believe in their ability to use their strengths to make a change. Once an individual recognizes the ways in which they can effectively take action, they can then gain control of their lives in relation to those around them.

At the individual level, empowerment can be seen as individual participation in community organizations and events that leads to perceived control. Empowerment within an organization results in collective decision making and leadership that gives the empowered group policy leverage. Community empowerment leads to collective action that provides the community with a sense of unity and access to necessary resources.

Empowerment can be categorized into five types:

Social empowerment addresses the social discriminations existing in a society based on disability, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. It refers to the enabling force that strengthens an individual's social relations and their position in social and political structures.

Education empowerment is recognized as an instrument of personal development and is an important factor in socio-political and economic transformation. Education not only has the ability to create self-confidence, self-esteem and self-sufficiency, but it also increases social, political, intellectual and cultural consciousness that is necessary to take action.

Economic empowerment and **political empowerment** give individuals and those of marginalized groups the ability to obtain power in ways that allow them to act in certain power structures.

Arguably the most important type of empowerment is **psychological empowerment** due to the power it gives individuals to transform themselves and combat their social obligations. Psychological empowerment is essential in order for an individual to take control of their own life and the way they act within their community.

Critique:

Empowerment is intended to improve people's lives; however, empowerment-based approaches can have paradoxical effects. Oftentimes empowerment is used to enable individuals in marginalized groups to identify the rights and privileges afforded to them and use leverage that power to combat their own oppression. This individualistic approach to empowerment is critiqued for neglecting to acknowledge and question systemic sources of oppression, such as sexism and racism. Some also argue that individual empowerment approaches tend to focus on people already equipped with a certain level of power and privilege.

Key Ideas/Tools:

Components of empowerment:

- Authority
- Resources
- Information
- Accountability

Further Scholarly Resources:

Articles:

Muhammad, A., & Yasin, M. G. (2011). Local Governance and Empowerment of Marginalized Groups. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 31(1), 115–125.

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.700.6955&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Page, N., & Czuba, C. E. (1999). Empowerment: What Is It? *Journal of Extension*, 37(5). <https://archives.joe.org/joe/1999october/comm1.php>

Perkins, D. D., & Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Empowerment Theory, Research, and Application. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5). <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/117200/ajcpbf02506982.pdf?sequence=1>

Books:

McGee, R., & Pettit, J. (2020). *Power, empowerment and social change*. Routledge.

