Power, Empowerment and Social Participation- the Building of a Conceptual Model

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Abstract

Social intervention integrates multidisciplinary and participative concepts and practices that, in different areas, contribute to social processes of empowerment, one of the intervention paradigms in contemporary society. The use of the term empowerment has been recurrent in the fields of psychological and social intervention and its definition implies the contribution of various knowledge. This requires the operational contextualization of its definition. Based on a review of the literature, this article intends to conceptualize and contextualize empowerment as a strategic process of intervention. It is structured around three topics that present the relations of power in contemporary society, as well as the conceptual process of empowerment and social participation. It produces a reflexive work combining various theoretical approaches of empowerment in order to define differente analitycal dimentions of the concept, and to produce a conceptual model that can be later operacionalized in empirical research.

Keywords: Power, empowerment, social participation, social intervention, social work

Introduction

The term *empowerment* has been used recurrently in the fields of social intervention, and its definition entails its extension across various spheres of knowledge, thus requiring a contextualization of its meaning. It proposes the creation of responsible communities in which those individuals who constitute the body assume greater control over their lives and participate democratically in daily life, bearing in mind the different collective arrangements and their context (Horochovski, 2006).

The concept of empowerment is complex, and one that in recent decades has shown increasing academic and social relevance in diverse fields of knowledge, having been incorporated into a wide range of areas, in particular, administration, economics, public health, psychology, social work, and political sociology. It also enters the political agenda of many actors and institutions such as governments, businesses and organizations of civil society, international agencies and development banks (ibidem, 2006).

A concept which has its roots in the civil rights struggles, the feminist movement, and the ideology of social action present in developed countries in the second half of the 20 century in the 1970s, it was shaped as well by the self-help movement, and in the 1980s, by community psychology. In the 1990s, influence came from those movements which sought to affirm citizens' rights in specific spheres of social life and society (Almeida, 2001; Carvalho, 2004).

As with the majority of emergent themes, empowerment was gradually transformed, elevated to an intellectual mode and present in the discourse of actors from political orientations and cultural identities that were at times on unequal footing. Thus, it may be said that a polysemic and indiscriminate treatment of the concept occurred, one in which the meaning was left up to the user and depending on any given intention or position on the political-ideological spectrum (Horochovski, 2006).

The understanding of the object of study, in addition to its value for the production of knowledge, seeks to contribute to social transformation since a more profound grasp of the concept can represent an attempt to deal with the inherent complexity of empowerment in social contexts. Empowerment, more than a self-legitimized buzzword, may well be considered an operational tool for monitoring social interventions and the resulting transformation, thus contributing to the effectiveness of practices and the underpinnings of an actual theory of social change. (Albuquerque, Santos & Almeida, 2016).

The present article is structured in two parts. The first part takes up the relationships of power in societies, and the second provides a theoretical contextualization for empowerment as a strategic process of social intervention.

This study shows that the processes of empowerment are both complex and interdependent and that participatory methodologies are essential for intervention processes which propose the redistribution of power in societies.

Power in societies

"*Power is a key concept for an understanding of processes of empowerment*". (Sadan, 2004)

Within the realm of social relationships, what is present are self-perceptions, identities, and the meanings given to the world and to things in and of themselves. In the same way, power is also inter-subjective, which always implies an interaction and an interdependence amongst those individuals who are more or less powerful (Bourdieu, 2001 apud Pinto, 2011). This conception of power plays a decisive role in terms of social intervention as it is from this perspective that the less powerful are not deprived of power and are indeed invested with power, which must in turn be mobilized. It is also from the perspective of reducing vulnerability and increasing power – meaning individuals and groups can make decisions for themselvesandpromote actionsand stress the achievement of results – that we address the concepts and the relationships of power in societies, cognizant that in order to empower (or give power to) people and/or groups it is particularly vital that the uneven distribution of power in society be recognized.

The English word 'empowerment' is derived from the root notion of 'power' and when we use this word, (obtaining, expanding or consolidating power) the concept in play is indeed the conceptual instrument of power (Pinto, 2011).

The definition of 'power' according to the Portuguese *Dicionário Aurélio* also refers to the synonyms of "possibility" and "ability". Physical force, strength of body or soul; empire, sovereignty, force or influence; possession, jurisdiction, domain, attribution; state government; importance, consideration; large quantities, abundance; military force; efficiency, effect, virtue; capacity to do something; mandate, proxy; means, resources; being able to do something; being subject to something; having physical strength to do something; have reasons to do something; capacity to do something (dicionariodoaurelio.com, 2017) with these being some of the many definitions of a simple word, a simple construct, and a polysemic concept of interest to many fields of knowledge.

Norberto Bobbio, a philosopher dedicated to the theme, comments in his book "Estado, Poder e Sociedade" ("State, Power and Society") (1985) that in political philosophy, the problem of power is presented as having three aspects, on the basis of which three fundamental theories can be distinguished: the substantialist, the subjectivist, and the relational (Bobbio, 2007).

According to substantialist theories, power is seen as a "thing" which can be possessed and used the same as any other type of property, be it a natural talent (such

as strength and intelligence, for example) or something acquired (as in wealth), and which can be employed to achieve whatever may represent the object of one's desire (Bobbio, 2007). For Hobbes (1651 apud Bobbio, 2007), "the power of a man (…) is his present means to obtain some future apparent good" [1651, trad. it. p. 82]. Akin to this is Bertrand Russell's definition (1938, apud Bobbio, 2007) according to which power consists of "the production of intended effects" which may assume three forms: physical and constrictive power (military power); psychological power (through threats of punishment or promises of rewards which consist mainly of the economic domain); mental power (exercised through persuasion or dissuasion, and which has its elementary form present in all societies in education.)

For Bobbio, the typical **subjectivist** interpretation of power is represented by Locke [1694, II, XXI] who maintains that power does not lie in one being the holder of a "thing" that aids in achieving a certain goal but rather an individual's competence in obtaining results. From this comes Locke's reference to "the power that fire has to melt lead" and the power that a sovereign has to make laws, and in so doing exercises control over the conduct of his subjects.

In contemporary political discourse, according to the same author, the most accepted interpretation concerns the **relational** concept of power, which puts forth that power should be understood as a relationship between two subjects in which the first party secures from the second a behavior that in "normal" circumstances [the absence of power] would not be obtained. The most well-known and also the most synthetic of definitions of the relational concept belongs to Robert Dahl: "Influence [a broader concept in which power is included] is a relationship among actors in which one actor induces other actors to act in some way that they would not otherwise act." (1963, trad, it. p. 68, apud Bobbio, 2007). "Marking a relation between two subjects, power thus defined is closely tied to the concept of freedom; the two concepts can be defined as a negation of the other: 'The power held by Person A implies the lack of freedom for Person B', or 'The freedom of Person A implies the non-power of Person B'" (Bobbio, 2007, p.78)

The writings of Michel Foucault (1979, 1980, 1996) amplify the discussion on the concept of power, broadening it to include other fields of the social and human sciences (Sadan, 2004). Foucault underscores a set of methodological rules which allow for establishing hypotheses that configure an approach and the objective of research much more than a complete theory (Albuquerque, 1995).

Relationships of power depend on one's culture, location and time (Sadan, 2004). Foucault expands on the discourse on power in contemporary western society, explaining its characteristics in the following way:

1. power is not a commodity, nor is it a position, an award or a conspiracy. It is the activation of political technologies which act in specific spheres of social life as well as

2. in everyday life. Power occurs in locations of all types and sizes, including the smallest and most intimate, such as the human body;

3. relationships of power are unstable, non-egalitarian, and asymmetrical. We should not expect to find immutable logic in power nor the possibility of equilibrium in this domain;

4. stepping off from the idea that power is not a thing, nor the control over a set of institutions, nor is it or does it have a hidden historical pattern, the objective of the researcher studying power is to discover how it acts. Therefore it becomes necessary to isolate, identify, and analyze the network of relationships which creates political technologies. It is important to research the level of micro-practices from which it can be learned how power acts in a social institution on the most common level of ordinary daily routine;

5. as power is not limited to political institutions, it plays a direct and creative role in social life. It is multidirectional, acting from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Although power is at its peak when situated within specific institutions, caution should be applied when identifying technologies of power in certain institutions given that power is neither a superstructure nor a quality of an institution;

6. domination is not the essence of power. Domination exists, but power also acts on governing bodies and not just the governed;

7. in relationships of power there is intention but no subject. Only on the micro level and the tactical level does power have intentions. On the strategic level, which includes the complex of relationships of power, no subject exists. (Sadan, 2004 p.57-59).

However, **relationships of power are balanced**. Power is integrated into a complex social practice in which human agency[1] has structural qualities, with the social structure being part of the human activity which creates and assures its own continuity. This model of duality of structure view social structure and human agency as two factors that construct and activate social relationships, with power being an important central component for both (Giddens, 1984 apud Sadan, 2004). It is human agency which creates social structure, establishing it, consolidating it, and also transforming it when it acts.

Yet according to Foucault, who did not believe in resistance because it negates the centrality of an autonomous subject when it has the capacity to influence and change social relationships, it is power and not human agency that is the central factor that motivates all other relationships. He did not accept that social change could arise

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[1] Agency is defined as the ability possessed by an actor or group of actors to make decisions, meaning that the actor is able to predict and purposely choose options. In terms of the extent or action to increase empowerment, a person or the agency of a group can be broadly envisaged by the number of social, political, andeconomic resourcesavailable to the actors for them to be productive and shielded from shocks (Alsop, Bertelsen & Holland, 2006).

from local efforts; in other words, he did not believe in the human capacity to effect social change, a belief central to the theory of empowerment (Sadan, 2004).

Thus, according to this author, we can simultaneouslyexplain power in terms of humanaction and in terms of structure: power is a basic component of human agency, the absolute lack of power means no longer being a human agent, and power is the human ability to intervene in events and make a difference. Power is an inseparable part of social interaction, being an integral feature of social life; it is always part of relationships and its signs can be understood even at the micro levels of interaction. Moreover, power is an individual's capacity to act in a guided and voluntary way to bring about change.

There are systems of domination and domain, with their respective rules and resources. To summarize, **power is a process in which human agency participates** in each person's inherent capacity to influence the world around him, **alongside social structure** (that appears in the form of structures of domination that determine the degree to which a person may influence the world). These relationships existing between human agency and social structure are dynamic and procedural.

In the words of Zygmunt Bauman (2003) "power consists in decision-making and it resides with those who make the decisions" (p.40).

Nanette Page and Cheryl Czuba (1999 apud Hur, 2006) affirm that the concept of empowerment is conceived as an idea of power as it is intimately related to the change of power – gaining it, using it, diminishing it, and losing it. Recently, power has been examined as something that is shared as it can afford additional strength when shared with others (Kreisberg, 1992 apud Hur, 2006). Shared power is defined as a process that occurs in relations and one that enables empowerment. It is understood as "**a multidimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their lives**" (Page & Czuba, 1999: 25 apud Hur, 2006).

The struggle for individual rights and their propagation have resulted in intense community-building (Bauman, 2003), such that "the only strategy available for achieving the premise of a 'just society' is the elimination of impediments to the equitable distribution of opportunities, removing them one by one and as they are brought to the attention of the public thanks to the articulation, manifestation, and effort of successive demands for recognition" (Bauman, 2003: 73).

It is in this direction that the processes of empowerment, and their respective levels and categories, will be presented in order to move along to the examination of observed practice.

Definitions of empowerment

"The violence of the oppressors, which also makes them dehumanized, establishes no other vocation than that of being less. As a distortion of being more, being less leads the

oppressed, sooner or later, to rise up against those who made them less. And this struggle only makes sense when the oppressed, in striving to recover their humanity, which is a way of creating it, do not feel themselves idealistically as oppressors and when they do not in fact become oppressors of the oppressors, rather the restorers of the humanity of both." (Freire, 1987)

By the term empowerment what is understood is **an intentional and continuous process, centered on the local community**, including mutual respect, critical reflection, attentiveness and participation through which those people who are lacking in certain resources can assume greater access to and control over them, or **a process through which people gain control over their lives, participate democratically in the life of the community, and display critical understanding of their environment** (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment entails the construction of responsible communities, ones in which the individuals that comprise them take on greater control of their lives and contribute in an egalitarian way to daily life, taking into account the various collective arrangements in place and their context (Horochovski, 2006).

These are the psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, and human resources that people call upon in their daily lives (World Bank Institute, 2007).

According to Elisheba Sadan (2004) and Carla Pinto (2011), it was Barbara Simon, one of the first authors to relate systematically with the concept of empowerment, who fundamentally influenced the development of its use. This author emphasizes the important connection between individuals and the community, encouraging an ecological contextual approach in order to deal with social situations. Solomon (1976, 1985) also stressed empowerment as a method for social work with African-Americans who suffer as victims of oppression, in which the **dynamic process** is underscored in that clients receive assistance as they develop skills that enable them to improve their life conditions and social position.

Carla Pinto (2011:48-51), in her doctoral thesis, dealt with the concept of empowerment as a process for intervention in which:

- There is an increase in personal, interpersonal, and political power such that individuals can act toward the goal of improving their lives;

- There is an increase in control through which individuals, groups, and/or communities become more able to control their own life circumstances and to achieve objectives in a way that shows mutual cooperation and help, and which maximizes quality of life – the multidimensional social process;

- The aim is participation with critical learning and transformation of feelings, thoughts, and individual actions, as well as the organization of society by equitably sharing power and resources;

- The aim is access to resources that are valued and redistributed by society, given that access to resources is dependent upon the power exercised by the subjects;

- There is recognition, creation, and utilization of resources and instruments by the individuals, groups, and communities themselves and in the setting where they live, which translates into an increase in power (psychological, sociocultural, political and economic) which allows for increased and more efficient exercise of citizens' rights;

- It is transformation – transformation of the relationships of power, which drives the overcoming of obstacles and the development of potentialities and which celebrates life by building and working together for change in social structures;

- It is the manifestation of social power on individual, organizational and community levels, being both process and result.

Empowerment is therefore an active process. Its form is determined by circumstances and events, and its essence is human activity that directed toward the change from a passive state to an active state. The process is one that integrates self-acceptance and self-

confidence, social and political understanding, and a personal capacity to assume a significant role in decision- making and in the control over resources in one's environment. The sense of personal capacity is linked to that of civic commitment (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

Categories of empowerment

Four categories of empowerment may be identified (Rich, Edelstein, Hallman and Wandersman, 1995 apud Ornelas, 1997):

i. **intrapersonal empowerment** which refers to a person's capacities in a given situation; some degree of this type of empowerment seems to be an essential condition for the process of participation in the context of community and may determine the degree of individual trust for participation in future actions;

ii. **instrumental empowerment** which refers to the individual capacity to participate and influence a decision- making process, which may be observed when there is interaction between factors such as the presentation of knowledge that is relevant to the question under debate, the material resources presented, the capacity for argumentation and persuasion, and the legitimacy in the participation;

iii. **formal empowerment** which emerges when institutions present mechanisms that influence public decisions that concern citizens and their social

institutions, creating new opportunities for citizens to participate in decision-making processes;

iv. **substantive empowerment** which refers to the capacity to make decisions and produce the desired results.

Thus, **hereditariness** and the conditions for growth and care are not only fundamental for a person's upbringing but they also represent opportunities and experiences provided by context which significantly corroborate for the structuring of an individual's personality. Of essential importance is a person's capacity to act and to make decisions to achieve goals, as this ability, or the lack of it, is responsible for molding a person's character and influences the degree to which a person is the leading player in his/her life (Pinderhughes, 1983 apud Sadan, 2004).

Let us speak now of *intrapersonal empowerment*: when people have power over their own lives, or when they have control over their lives and are able to influence others and bring about change. Although this begins with "me" (self- empowerment), it cannot be considered as apart from politics or from power; in other words, becoming empowered signifies allowing other people to feel better but this does not mean that they will be free from oppression (Adams, 2008 apud Sadan, 2004).

Empowerment is still a process of internal change (a person's sense or belief in his/her own capacity to make decisions and resolve his/her own problems) and **external change** (finding expression in the capacity to act and to implement practical knowledge, information, skills, capabilities and other new resources acquired during the process). It is an **interactive** process that involves the individual and his/her environment. The result of instrumental empowerment is capacities based on insights and abilities whose essential features are critical political awareness, competences namely with respect to others, and the capacity to cope with frustrations and struggle for greater influence over the environment (Kieffer, 1984 and Parsons, 1988 apud Sadan, 2004).

The approach to comprehending the concept enjoys little consensus albeit some agreement exists in terms of internal change, also called **psychological empowerment**, and external change, **political empowerment**. Upholding this distinction, the former takes place on the level of the person's awareness and feelings whereas the latter occurs when the change is real and allows the person to participate in decision-making that affects his/her life. To achieve psychological empowerment, an individual only needs inner strength, but political empowerment requires environmental conditions, mainly of an organizational nature, which allow the person to exercise new capabilities. (Gruber & Trickett, 1987 apud Sadan, 2004), requiring that both be integrated since the events occurring in one's private life is also an expression of one's social situation (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brentley, 1988 apud Sadan, 2004).

The process of empowerment requires personal resources, such as the capacity for relationships – empathy, sensitivity, and openness to communication in terms of expectations, sharing the desires and interests of others; the capacity to construct and maintain bonds of friendship, trust and respect in relation to others, the capacity to accept criticism and to face and solve conflicts; self-acceptance and personal conviction – the feeling of self-worth, belief in validity of goals and personal life values; inner conviction of control – understanding of the historical nature of one's surrounding and life condition; belief in one's own capacity for intervention, taking an active position when dealing with problems – facing any surrounding challenges and seeking out solutions while maintaining objective within reach; flexibility and adaptation to disruptive life events – the capacity to integrate unexpected change into one's more broad-ranging life plan; openness – the capacity and disposition to signal to others one's need for help in situations of crisis and requesting social support (Herriger, 2006b apud Kleba & Wendausen, 2009).

The development of critical awareness is the process through which people gain ever greater understanding of the sociocultural conditions which have molded their lives and the extent of their capacity to change or overcome these conditions. A person lives not only in the present but also in a historical context. A person is capable of not only interpreting but also of interpreting others' interpretations and thus critical awareness provides the essence and the basis for all human learning (Freire 1987). Critical self- awareness includes the recognition of all individuals of their right to assign a name to their experiences, to learn to speak in their own language, and to give names to the elements in their world (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986 apud Sadan, 2004).

The literature also emphasizes that **the development of critical awareness is an essential component in empowerment**, which in practice is considered the product of a dialectic between action and reflection and comprises three paths: 1) development of a collective awareness in which the individual is not the only person to have a problem; 2) development of social consciousness, that is to say, social and collective problems are influenced by social organization;

3) development of political consciousness within the mind-set that the solution to problems requires social change.

In this respect, if we consider that empowerment is a process which aims to strengthen a group's capacity to make intentional choices and to transform these choices into actions and produce the results desired by the individual, it then becomes necessary to examine not only the capacity to act but also the prospects for transforming the choices into results (Albuquerque, Santos & Almeida, 2016).

Working with the community builds the individual's capacity to act together with others and thus create a society. It teaches people to cooperate, to make group decisions and to resolve common problems and mobilize resources for the common

good. Belief in active democracy, in participating to the utmost in the life of one's community, and in the exercise of an individual's right to influence the important decisions in his/her life, these represent the basis of thought on empowerment, and without a doubt, they stem from the values of community work. However, in this community work, as in whichever other professional field, the values may not always testify to what is common practice in reality. Empowerment of the community is thus attained via the active participation of these self- same members in the decision-making processes which affect the community, beginning with the goal-setting stage and continuing through to the assessment of the results of their efforts. The more strongly directed to local groups and organizations (and the less directed to formal and/or external services to the community) these actions are focused, the more power the community will have in this area of intervention (Sadan, 2004).

The process of empowerment also brings about a strengthening of the organization, both as a whole to achieve objectives and targets and as a system or unit. Offered here are experiences of leadership and shared decision-making, actions of communication and effective support, distribution of roles and responsibilities according to each person's abilities, the exchange of information and resources, appropriate management with respect to growth and organizational development (Silva & Martínez, 2004) "emancipatory forces, sources for change and social transformation" (Gohn, 2004, p. 24).

We should also identify the **empowering institutions asdifferent fromthe empowered institutions**, with the former being those which favor and support their members in both personal and collective empowerment processes whereas the latter are those which develop a process of organizational empowerment shown in their engagement in issues of social and political interest (Silva & Martínez, 2004; Stark, 2006 apud Kleba & Wendausen, 2009). In other words, such an institution may choose to act only with the intent to expand and strengthen the resources and possibilities of its members without exerting political and social influence on the surrounding conditions, which results in a smaller impact on the development of their members' capacities.

Carmen Silva and María Loreto Martínez (2004) have identified four basic characteristics of **empowering organizations**, noting that they: 1) believe their members provide growth and in a state of trust; 2) permit shared leadership, which benefits individuals as much as the organization itself; 3) ensure that there are opportunities for taking on different roles; 4) offer social support. **Empowered organizations** are those which work in networks, influence policies, reach their goals, develop ways to increase their effectiveness, etc.

Levels

According to the conceptual model developed by William Ninacs (2003), intervention is based on three levels of empowerment – **individual** (corresponding to the process

of assimilation of power by a person or a group), **organizational** (referring to the appropriation of power by an organization in which a person, group or other organization is empowered) and **community** (corresponding to the appropriation of the community by the collective). It is his understanding that empowerment takes place via a succession of stages through which the individuals or groups appropriate the power and the ability to perform in an autonomous, free, informed, and clear way, thus transforming choices into decisions.

Based on this model, Carla Pinto (2011:67-68) defines:

- **Individual empowerment** is thus described by the interaction on four different planes: **self-esteem** (the search for the redefinition of identity and the feeling of self-accomplishment and self-confidence); **critical awareness** (formation of a collective, social and political consciousness requiring the capacity for reflection and social analysis); **competences** (capabilities that allow for the participation in and execution of actions, be they new skills or the redefinition of those already in the subject's possession); and **participation** (the transition from the lack of voice to the presence of an individual's ability to express him/herself; emphasis on increasing involvement in decision-making processes and in taking responsibility for the consequences of participation). For its part, community empowerment involves: **communication** (positive interaction, the expression of different points of view, the circulation of relevant information, transparency in terms of decision- making processes); **capital in the community** (feeling of belonging and awareness of the issues of citizenship implicit to both self-help and collective action); **competences** (identification and recognition of community strengths – creating and maintaining synergies, using resources, cooperation; and **participation** (bonds that allow members of the community to participate effectively in the community and in its systems and resources).

- **Organizational empowerment**, considered to be the intermediary, the context, or the means through which individuals or communities enter the empowerment process, also operates on four planes: **recognition** (legitimacyofthe organization, which depends upon the way its members perceive it and how its surrounding environment view and relates to it); **critical awareness** (the capacity to analyze the organization); **competences** (displayed by the community members, whether in decision-making positions or not); and **participation** (of the organization within the community or in terms of other organizations).

To summarize, the process of empowerment is a well-beaten path, both formally and informally, leading in the direction of greater participation on the part of citizens, organizations and community development, enabling them all to enjoy a stronger voice, more influence and greater capacity to act and to make decisions on

those issues which affect their lives in different instances (Horochovski, 2006; Ornelas, 1997).

The conceptual map (map 1) shows the inter-relationship amongst concepts, categories, and levels, which aids in understanding the complexity which underlies the processes of empowerment.
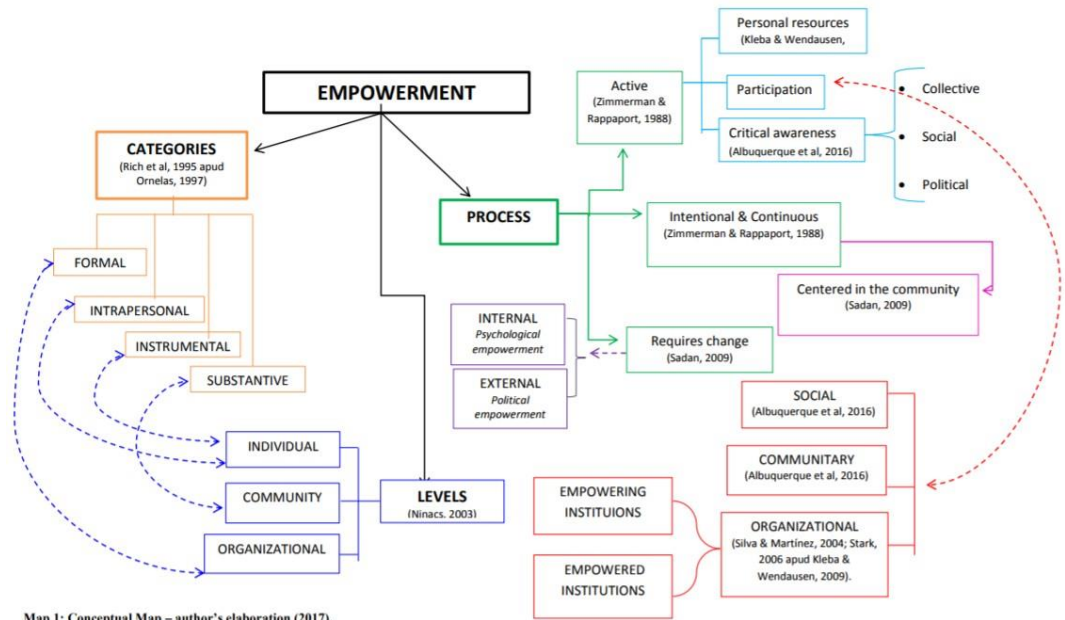
Map 1: Conceptual Map – author's elaboration (2017).

Map 1: Conceptual Map – author's elaboration (2017).

A reading and analysis of the synthesis provided here offers a conceptualization of empowerment as an **active process** that implies the mobilization of personal resources, participation (social, community, and organizational), and critical awareness (collective, social, and political) that is **intentional** and **continuous** (centered in the community), which **requires change** (internal – psychological empowerment; and external – political empowerment) and is divided into four categories – **intrapersonal**, **instrumental**, **formal**, and **substantive** – which can respectively be associated with three different and interdependent levels – **individual**, **organizational**, and **community**.

Empowerment and participatory methodologies

Social intervention directed toward underprivileged populations is guided by an ethical policy project to assure social and citizenship rights, greater justice and social equity, stronger commitment to quality of services, and the defense of liberty and human dignity. However, the result is often a social construction in which the inventors, theories, practices, and contexts significantly influence the choices which

are on offer. The concepts, the personal characteristics, the skills and personal experiences, the intervening party's maturity, the organizational culture, the characteristics of the territory and the public policies relative to the users of the services offered and the citizens claiming their due rights – these are the intrinsic elements of this construction. As there is no set guidebook for an intervention that respects the aforementioned ethical policy project, participatory methodologies, relative to the creation of collaborative action networks, have been enjoying increasing regard and attention (Almeida, 2017). This author considers participation a recurrent theme in all the approaches and models for social intervention in contemporary societies, attaining a 'quasi fashionable' status in several contexts.

Nevertheless, as was stated earlier, for the process of empowerment to occur, and for there to be a transformation within the person as a result, and for this change to be projected to the community where the person lives, which could then in turn influence the person and automatically influence the community, there must be a social openness which invites the people to participate. Community participation and empowerment are the main ingredients for the innovative social intervention programs which are structured to take place within a community context with the active collaboration of the target- group(s) (Ornelas, 1997).

One of the main objectives of participation is to **increase the power** of individuals and communities in order to make individual and collective decisions. The concept is structured on two interdependent levels: the **micro**, or individual level

– the process of individualization represents a path to self-identification and the feeling of belonging to a group or community denoting processes of co-construction, as much in terms of social alternatives as in structures for opportunity on the **meso** (community) and **macro** (political) levels for the construction of a course which defends the sharing of power and the affirmation of differences, and adopts a "policy of intervention guided by ethical principles which defend freedom, equality, and social justice" (Vieira, 2015, p.127 apud Almeida & Serra, 2016).

To make it possible for an increase in power at these different levels to occur, something must occur to trigger individual participation in all those contexts that require decision- making on issues dealing with the individual and/or the collective. Participation can be allowed, stimulated, guaranteed, maintained, and manifest at different levels (Pretty, 1995). Experiences which involve participation relate to the participants' degree of mastery and understanding of the process they find themselves in. Aware participation is one in which the individuals involved possess both clarity and understanding of the process that they are experiencing, for without an appreciation of the reasons and consequences of their actions, the participation is restricted and seemingly established for the sake of some form of domination. For the same reason, participation cannot be imposed, donated or awarded. Its legitimacy is found in the awareness of its importance, in the negotiation of spaces for its exercise and for the constitution of rules that will endeavor to democratically delimit its

practice. Therefore, participation must be considered as a great instrument for enjoying the fullest rights of citizenship. In its broadest scope, full citizenship can only be reinforced in the presence of a notion of participation that is understood as a collective action and a conscious exercise that is voluntary and earned (Tenório & Rosemberg, 1997).

According to Helena Almeida (2017), partnership31[1] and interventions in networks constitute mastery where participatory methodologies operate given that they presuppose mutual acceptance of various social, political, and economic organizations along with diverse professional actors with competences adequate for the intervention in complex and diversified contexts. Active and aware participation that brings together the participants' degree of mastery and understanding of the process they are involved in (and in different contexts) will produce results that are emancipating.

The capacity for acting and the possibility to transform choices into results are directly related to participatory methodologies in which the individual is the agent who is active in the processes of occupational performance and social participation where, more than results, the experiences had by the members will serve to promote and concretize the empowerment.

In the establishment of processes intended for social transformation, the multiple concepts for building and the various ways to participate offer a new window of opportunity which inspire the reconstruction of models and paradigms. Structuring a common understanding – a type of grammar for intervention – is essential, one which in theory supports the construction of the architecture of participation, or in other words, a conceptual network that establishes the parameters for assessing participation (Almeida & Serra, 2016).

Conclusion

Participation is the redistribution of power. The capacity to act and to exercise power, that is to say, the development and the struggle against inequality, are simultaneously a condition and a product of empowerment (Albuquerque *et al.*, 2016). This is a strategy through which individuals, not presently participating, can promote significant social reform that will allow them to share benefits that involve society to a greater extent (Arnstein, 2002).

Participation is beneficial in project management given that it **favors the sustainability of actions** (it diversifies resources and matches them to the target-publics and the characteristics of the community and the territory), it **strengthens**

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[1] Partnership invites actors to intervene, working together in an innovative way which goes beyond the simple articulation of competences. It is a relationship of structured and formalized sharing amongst social, economic, political, cultural, and community actors involved in a common action from the planning stage to the realization of the intervention and ending with the assessment of its activities and services. It is a way to manage relationships of power (Denis Bourque, 2008 apud Almeida, 2017).

the bonds of closeness to the community (through the sharing of the perspective, the knowledge of expectations, needs, potentials, and the limits of individuals, families, groups, and organizations), it **allows for innovation by affording professionals an opportunity for thedevelopment of propositional power** (networking favors interinstitutional relationships, the recognition of needs not covered by existing devices and projects, and based on this knowledge, the elaboration of jointly-made proposals), it **favors obtaining more wide- ranging results** (given the diversification of target-publics and organizational and professional inter-knowledge), it **strengthens the dissemination of best practices and the achievement of outcomes via partnerships** (which stem from the commitment to responsibilities and the division of tasks amongst the parties involved with the project), it **favors information sharing** (promoting moments of team-work and sharing), it **reinforces networking** (via the creation of interpersonal and interinstitutional connections on the professional and political level), **and mediation among counterparts** in the resolution of disagreements and conflicts. (Almeida, 2017).

Empowerment thus implies the development of participatory processes with respect to the construction of autonomy for the individuals and populations with which one works, and in so doing serves to produce those conditions that are conducive for decision-making and that create and develop the structures which enable opportunities to arise.

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