

What is the Unit of Empowerment? An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

This article sets out to examine the meaning of empowerment in social work theory and approaches this task by asking what is the unit of empowerment? The article begins by exploring the spectrum of definitions of empowerment and of power, recognising the latter as the root concept of empowerment. Three units of empowerment are then identified: the individual, societal and ecological. Two forms of ecological empowerment, weak and strong, are detailed. It is then argued that empowerment is best understood from a strong ecological perspective. We define ecological empowerment as the liberation of the Earth system, so as to optimise its functioning, and, in turn, empower all levels of its organisation, including societies and individuals. The article ends with an exploration of the implications of such integration at a policy level relating to all actors in a social work setting.

Keywords: ecological empowerment, individual empowerment, neo-liberalism, policy, power, social empowerment

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Introduction

In recent years, empowerment has become a central theme in many fields within the social sciences, from human geography to business studies and across social movements for change. Social work practice is also focused on the concept of empowerment. In July 2014, the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly defined social work as ‘a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes

social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' (IFSW, 2014).

In this article, we seek to re-visit the meaning of empowerment. The origins of this article stem from a project involving the development of a digital passport for a child with profound multiple learning difficulties. More details on this case are given in the [supplemental material](#). We ask what exactly does empowerment signify and why are there so many different interpretations of what it is and how it works? To do this, we begin with a literature review of the various definitions of empowerment and its root concept, power. We then examine what the unit of empowerment is. Is it the individual, the community or some larger ecological system?

By addressing these questions, this article sets out a new understanding of what empowerment really is and considers the implications for integration, policy, legislation and practice. At the outset, it is important to emphasise that this area has vast breadth and depth, encompassing many aspects of social and ecological theory. This article is meant as a beginning, opening up some new ideas for consideration, whilst requiring significant future work to tease these issues apart in terms of pure and applied implications for the field.

Literature review

What is empowerment?

Empowerment first appeared in written communication in mid-seventeenth-century Britain, with a meaning that suggests delegated authority or authorisation to act. One of the earliest uses of the term empowerment within the context of social work was by Freire (1972), who firmly located it as a response to oppression in Latin America. He equated it to greater political and social equality through mutual support, improved economic stability, collective learning and social justice.

Empowerment has variously been described as a form of intervention, a goal or a process (Gutierrez *et al.*, 1995), whilst Couto (1989) observes that empowerment not only involves action but also reflection. Solomon defined empowerment as 'a process whereby persons who belong to a stigmatised social category throughout their lives can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and the performance of valued social roles' (Solomon, 1976, p. 6).

Rappaport (1981, p. 15) wrote that 'By empowerment I mean that our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives'. This meaning (of control over one's life) is further extended in Maton and Salem's (1995, p. 631) definition of empowerment as 'a mechanism by which people, organisations, and communities gain

mastery over their affairs' and in [Luttrell *et al.* \(2009, p. 16\)](#) as 'a progression that helps people gain control over their own lives and increases the capacity of people to act on issues that they themselves define as important'. [Albuquerque *et al.* \(2017\)](#) consider empowerment as the product of a dialectic between action and reflection, somehow mediating and promoting both.

[Baistow \(1994\)](#) notes that empowerment is often understood as an external force, wherein an individual or organisation empowers someone else. Thus, the social worker acts to empower their client.

The World Bank's definition of empowerment is more oriented towards building resources, defining empowerment as 'the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives' ([Narayan-Parker, 2002, p. 14](#)). In a World Bank report of 2000/2001, empowerment is considered along with security and opportunity as one of the three pillars of the fight against poverty ([World Bank, 2001](#)).

[Batliwala \(1993\)](#) focuses on the balance and relationship of power between individuals and social groups, defining empowerment as a process of transforming the power relationships between individuals and social groups.

Issues with defining empowerment

[Adams \(2003, p. 32\)](#) notes that the 'richness of theorists and activists in the contemporary field of empowerment is partly responsible for the lack of synthesis in the concept and its applications to practice'. [Rappaport \(1984\)](#) observed that it may be easier to define empowerment in its absence, within the contexts of emptiness, powerlessness or helplessness, rather than in its presence, because empowerment can take different forms for different individuals and within different contexts. Simon refers to empowerment as 'a term that confuses even as it inspires' ([Simon, 1990, p. 27](#)).

[Zimmerman \(1990\)](#) argued that constructing a singular definition of empowerment may in fact contradict the very concept of empowerment. Instead, he emphasises the need for a multidimensional approach.

Defining power

[Rowlands \(1997, p. 9\)](#) observes that: 'Some of the confusion about empowerment arises because the root concept—power—is itself disputed'. As [Croft and Beresford \(2000, p. 117\)](#) note: 'Empowerment is an inherently political idea in which issues of power, the ownership of power,

inequalities of power and the acquisition and redistribution of power are central'.

Power can manifest itself, and thus be defined, in many different relationships, often simultaneously. Calvès (2009) explored some of these, identifying the power of authoritarian domination ('power over'), the power to achieve change ('power to') and the power of a group working together ('power with'). More recently, in the socio-feminist and racial equality literature, focused upon individual rights, there has been an emphasis upon the power to believe and to break free from the internalised oppression (power from within).

Foucault explored power as a dynamic energy, which necessitated ongoing production at multiple sites, thus creating instability at the local level (Keenan, 2001). Foucault (1980) further emphasised that the practices of power regulate subjects through self-discipline and self-regulation, whilst seeing the use and abuse of power as two sides of the one coin, dependent on each other as part of the whole. He emphasised the impossibility of separating action, whether well-intentioned or otherwise, from power. Once one party feels indebted to someone helping them, a power imbalance emerges. Thus, power is nonlinear across a complex system such as a society or community.

Sheridan (1980) highlights Foucault's warning of the inseparable nature of power and knowledge. Where power is embedded within a dominant philosophical or political dogma, it may act to preserve the incumbent system, preventing alternative states from emerging. Thus, power can act to maintain the *status quo* rather than change it. This rather contradicts the conceptualisation of power as the capacity to produce change, as set out by Miller (1983) and many others.

Another contestable characteristic of power, and, therefore, empowerment, relates to whether we consider power as zero-sum or variable-sum. In other words, is there a fixed amount of power that needs to be competed for, shared out, parasitised or defended, or can power be created (Read, 2012)?

Kanter (1979) envisages power as an infinite commodity, rather than a finite resource to be jealously guarded. Follett (in Metcalf and Urwick, 1941, p. 101) wrote: 'our task is not to learn where to place power; it is how to develop power... Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it'.

The zero-sum conceptualisation underpins much of the equality literature, in terms of the need to take power back or to overthrow a system that exploits power. Furthermore, zero-sum is very much an individualistic empowerment concept, with its emphasis on the empirical, reductionist thinking of building blocks, whereas variable power approaches have more in common with systems thinking, as we shall see shortly.

Foucault (1977) points towards an inequality in knowledge as a root cause of disempowerment, wherein knowledge is power. The Mental

Health (Scotland) Act (2015) set out to empower disabled people by increasing their knowledge. Pettit (2012) highlights the fact that although power represents a mutual interaction across agency (processes and actors) and structure (beliefs and social norms), with empowerment as a process that requires changes in both dimensions, the difficulty is that power is not always obvious nor visible. Of course, this may be intentional, since any power associated with knowledge can be possessed only if it is not shared (Skene, 2019). In this sense, power represents a gradient, which requires monopolisation (i.e. the maintenance of difference). Without such a gradient, there cannot be a potential difference and thus no useful power.

Follet (in Metcalf and Urwick, 1941) distinguished between ‘equal power’ and ‘power with’. Equal power was seen as setting the stage for a fair fight, whereas power with represented the joint development of power, where power is variable-sum and represents a unifying force, which allows for infinite difference and, as a result, eradicates tribalism and conflict. This is interesting on many levels, but particularly because a positive group characteristic (power-with) is seen to quench a more negative group characteristic (tribalism).

The relationship between power and empowerment is dependent on the school of thinking adopted. More traditional positions view empowerment as something given by an empowerer, such as a representative of the state, where the subject, be it an individual or a group, is seen to be disempowered. However, critical theory sees this as a dependency relationship, wherein the empowerer imposes significant power upon the disempowered, further exacerbating the situation (Gruber and Trickett, 1987). Critical theorists instead emphasise a bottom-up approach, rooted in conflict and resistance. Foucauldian theory challenges critical theory, raising concerns that the radical transformations demanded can create painful and disruptive consequences (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

The unit of empowerment

Having noted the multifaceted aspects of defining empowerment, the array of meanings of power itself and the differences in applying the principle, whether as a process or a structure, we next turn to an important question: what is the unit of empowerment? This lies at the heart of any understanding of what empowerment is and how it relates to our well-being, social functionality and identity. Empowerment is variously described as acting at individual, community and ecological levels. So, is there one type of empowerment or does the concept differ at each level of societal organisation? Many legislators and researchers separate empowerment at the individual and the community levels. There are three fundamental units. These are the individual, society and the Earth

system (the combination of humanity, all other living organisms and the geographical landscape and climate).

The individual as the unit of empowerment

Empowering the individual is a common theme, which often embraces individualism, independence and personalisation (Figure 1a) (Rodgers *et al.*, 2018). Luttrell *et al.* (2009) point to the historical origins of the concept of empowerment, rooted in feminist theory and oppression studies, as focusing on personal and inner dimensions of power. Similarly, measures of women's collective efficacy focus upon their own, individual, perceived ability to take collective action, thus highlighting the individual as the unit of empowerment (Kuhlmann *et al.*, 2014).

Pinderhuges (1983, p. 332) defined power as acting at the level of the individual, defining power as 'the capacity to influence the forces which affect one's life space for one's own benefit'. Rose (1990, p. 49) recognised the individual as the unit of empowerment, observing that: 'Empowerment means a process of dialogue through which the client is continuously supported to produce the range of possibility that she/he sees appropriate to his/her needs; that the client is the center for all decisions that affect her/his life'. Lord and Hutchison (1993, p. 7) define empowerment as 'processes whereby individuals achieve increasing control of various aspects of their lives and participate in the community with dignity'.

Individualism became the signature of political modernity, appealing to the electorate with promises of reduced taxation and a sense of control, whilst dominating government policy across all sectors, including social work, where it featured as individual actualisation (Rogers, 1959), personalisation (Needham, 2014) and individual empowerment (Staples, 1990). Here, the achieving individual is the contributor to a better world. The neo-liberal dogma emphasises the centrality of the individual, shifting the emphasis away from society as a meaningful unit of empowerment (Rose, 1999). The Tea Party politics in America exemplified this shift in political thinking (Williamson *et al.*, 2011). Bandura shared a similar view, exploring empowerment in terms of self-efficacy measured as the ability of a single, integral self in overcoming mental barriers internal to itself (Bandura, 1999).

Individualism has been seen as important because higher-level units of empowerment risk allowing individuals to be sacrificed for the greater good, an accusation levelled at post-development thinking (Pieterse, 1998). Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights very much focuses on the individual. However, issues arise when empowerment becomes tightly linked to the politicisation of the individual, namely neo-liberalism. Webb notes that the 'Neo-liberal conception of

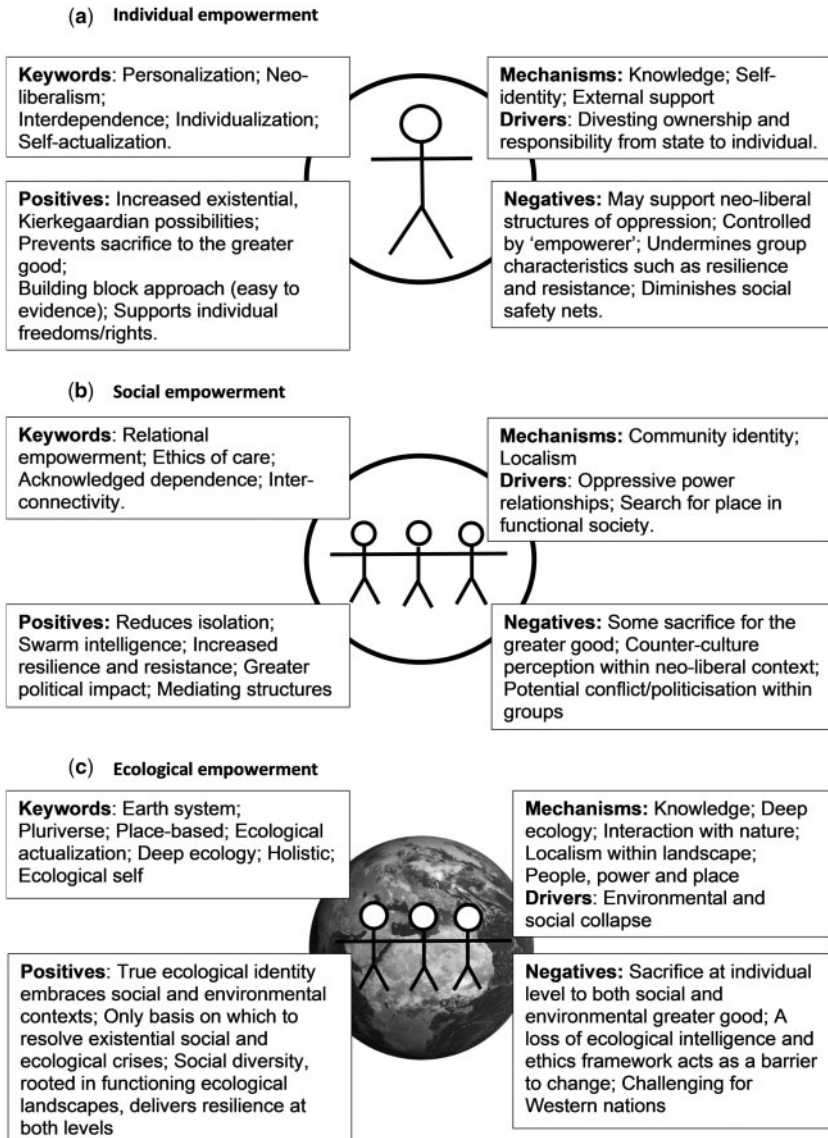


Figure 1: The three units of empowerment (see text for details). (a) Individual empowerment, (b) social empowerment and (c) ecological empowerment

self-governance dovetails nicely into notions of empowerment in the caring professions' (Webb, 2006, p. 57).

However, the individual as the unit of empowerment is not solely the domain of neo-liberalism. The [Scottish Executive \(2006, p. 6\)](#), then a Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition, claimed that 'it is clear that the

principle of personalisation needs increasingly to be the philosophy on which social services are founded’.

As individual empowerment became central to neo-liberal social policy, it became obvious that such policies would greatly impact negatively on the more vulnerable members of our society, unable to function within such a system, leading to marginalisation. Indeed, the conceptualisation of empowerment as an individualistic unit has been strongly criticised (Spencer, 2013). It has been described as undermining the value of empowerment in terms of resisting social inequality and injustice (Calvès, 2009). Bacqué and Biewener (2013) wrote that ‘empowerment was early on co-opted by neo-conservatives and neo-liberals alike, and deployed as a justification to deregulate, devolve, and diminish social safety nets by valorising entrepreneurial self-care and “responsibilisation”’.

Many schools of Latin American thought associate empowerment with neo-liberal policies and the World Bank’s development agenda in the region (Caccia Bava, 2003) and thus are repulsed by it as a concept. Some authors see the individualisation of empowerment as an attempt to hijack social movements and popular initiatives for democracy (e.g. Larrea, 2005).

Sharma (2008) has examined the Mahila Samkhya program in Uttar Pradesh, India, a public-private partnership aimed at empowering low-caste rural women. However, having examined its impact, Sharma concluded that the programme had become entangled with neo-liberalist thinking and now unfortunately reinforced the structures of oppression it set out to combat.

Miraftab (2004) has written about post-Apartheid community-based waste collection programs in Cape Town, South Africa, noting that they represent ‘the discursive element in neo-liberal governance—namely, how empowerment and participatory discourses were marshalled to justify using the underpaid or unpaid labor of poor women and men in the townships, to serve the state’s cost-cutting agenda’.

Rushing (2016) goes further, stating that the current individualisation movement threatens empowerment completely, asking: ‘Can empowerment be recovered from neoliberalism, as freedom is being recovered from liberalism and libertarianism, and autonomy is being recovered from neo-Kantianism?’

Society as the unit of empowerment

The relational self, where the individual is defined within its context and is irreducible from that context, has been an important thread throughout recent times, emphasising the importance of situating the individual with a functioning society in order to achieve true well-being

(Figure 1b). Indeed, this thinking goes back to the writings of Adam Smith (1759) in his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

In more recent times, we can trace a social unit of empowerment back to the Third System Project launched by the International Foundation for Development Alternatives (IFDA) in 1976, but originating in discussions during the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm. Also important was the 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld report entitled 'What to Do: Alternative Development' (Friedman, 1992). The Third System Project targeted the emergence of an alternative development model based around local space and the primary community, whether geographical or organisational (IFDA, 1980).

Berger and Neuhaus (1977) situated empowerment within the context of the community, where mediating structures, such as family and neighbourhood, could empower individuals. Labonte (1989) argues that, at the community level, empowerment relates to the enhancement of community control over resources.

In terms of mechanisms for empowerment, Hennink *et al.* (2012) suggest that, again, these differ between individual and community levels. At the level of the individual, knowledge, an enabling environment, the individual's self-identity, their decision-making capacity and their ability to effect change are viewed as important, requiring psychological (internal) and political (external) empowerment. At the community level, mechanisms include the ability of a community to make decisions, action those decisions, set its own priorities, build capacity, secure resources and be sustainable. Riger (1993) wrote that: 'The empowered individual in community psychology need not be the individual in isolation or even in groups, fighting with others for power and control. Rather, we should consider connection as important as empowerment'.

Gutierrez (1989) concludes that: 'It is not sufficient to focus only on developing a sense of personal power or working towards social change, but efforts to change should encompass individual, interpersonal, and institutional level of practice'. Evans (1992) discusses the integration of micro-models (individual empowerment) and macro-models (community empowerment) as an important synergy, allowing the power of the group to strengthen the power of the individual. However, this emphasis still focuses on individual empowerment. The term relational empowerment (Russell *et al.*, 2009), also referred to as interpersonal empowerment (Wong, 2008), recognises the importance of the society as the unit of empowerment.

This concept of social empowerment is very apparent in First Nation philosophy. Husband (1995, p. 95) writes 'In non-European cultures, the self-evident primacy of the individual in relation to the collective cannot be assumed'. Mbiti (1969, p. 108) states 'I am what we are'. Ubuntu, a sub-Saharan African philosophy, can be summarised as the concept that no one can be self-sufficient and that interdependence is a reality for all

(Nussbaum, 2003). The terms ‘interdependence’ and ‘interconnectedness’ have become Western synonyms for ubuntu (Theron and Phasha, 2015), though lack the deeper cultural context.

MacIntyre (1999) concluded that we do not have individual rights, at our foundation, but that we are irreducibly social animals. He discussed the virtues of acknowledged dependence. Wilks (2005) suggests that ‘feminist ethicists have argued that our moral identities are located in and constructed through our caring relations with others’.

Ungar (2011, p. 15) argues that whilst the resilience of individuals is a result of a combination of personal and environmental factors, ‘resilience is as, or more, dependent on the capacity of the individual’s physical and social ecology to potentiate positive development under stress than the capacity of individuals to exercise personal agency during their recovery from risk exposure’.

Theron and colleagues note that many of the resilience processes identified in international studies manifest locally also, including attachment, mastery and meaning-making (Theron and Phasha, 2015), but observe that local research also draws attention to processes that are embedded in indigenous worldviews and values, notably, interdependence, spirituality, and duty to kin. In addition, attachments are not primarily to parents, as in most Western societies, but rather to the extended family (Theron and Theron, 2011).

The earth system as the unit of empowerment

Social work has embraced the environment throughout its history. As early as 1922, Richmond acknowledged the importance of the environment in social work practice stating that the physical environment ‘becomes part of the social environment’ (Richmond, 1922, p. 99). Reynolds (1933) also saw the environment as an important context for social work. Dewey envisaged a framework founded on interactions or transactions in which nature itself was seen as a ‘moving whole of interacting parts’ (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010, p. 106).

A number of schools of social work theory have embraced the environmental context, including green social work (Lucas-Darby, 2011), eco-feminist social work (Stephens *et al.*, 2010), eco-spiritual social work (Dylan and Coates, 2012), ecological social work (Ungar, 2002), environmental social work (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017) and sustainable social work (Rambaree, 2013). These schools often look beyond society for a context. They examine the impact of ecological degradation upon humanity, and differ from other social work approaches by placing the ecosystem at the centre of practice rather than the individual, an idea referred to as ecocentrism.

Environmental social work scholars have called for place-based approaches to environmental scholarship (Kemp, 2011). Furthermore, environmental and human rights are tightly bound (Espinosa, 2019), and in pre-colonial Africa, for example, women often played a key role in indigenous systems of environmental protection.

Stromquist (1993) explored the concept of cultural empowerment, emphasising the importance of cultural and symbolic practises as reaching beyond social empowerment to a greater, environmental unit of empowerment. He saw culture as a portal to access a deeper understanding of a society, focusing on this context as the foundation of minority rights, rather than extrapolating these rights from our Western, Northern conceptualisation, devoid of such connectivity to the environment, where nature has fixed no limits to our hopes.

However, an important observation must be made at this point. There are two very different imaginings of the environment and its relevance to social work and human well-being. On the one hand, we have the most commonly held position, weak ecology, where nature is viewed as an inspirational, comforting and useful analogy, representing balance, functional integrity, resilience and vulnerability, as evidenced by its ongoing destruction. In this way, nature can act as a mentor. The second position, strong ecology, views the Earth system as the only show in town, wherein our very existence and meaning are rooted. Here, we have evolved as a species and emerged as a living extension of the Earth system.

Our relational self is within this Earth system, and any attempt to understand ourselves can only be found within this greater whole. Furthermore, given the fact that our very existence relies upon the Earth system in terms of water, air and food, and that any system is optimised only at the level of the system itself, with every other level or organisation being sub-optimal, then the unit of empowerment can be argued to be that of the system itself. The system is self-organising, and thus empowered at the level of the system, not at the level of its component sub-systems such as its societies and individuals. And so, in accordance with system theory, the unit of empowerment should be at the level of the Earth system (Figure 1c).

Methodology

A literature review, involving the examination of over 500 papers across one hundred years, highlighted the range of definitions of empowerment currently in use within social work theory, fundamental differences in the application of empowerment theory in practice, from a process-driven approach to an outcome-driven approach, and an underlying array of definitions of the root context, power. This study originated from

work to develop a digital passport for a child with profound multiple learning difficulties, as detailed in the [supplemental material](#). We recognised that empowerment was being used in government policy in two very different ways: at the individual level and at the community level. This article attempts to identify what is the unit of empowerment. Three potential units were identified: the individual, society and the Earth system and the literature promoting each of these was reviewed.

Findings

We argue in this article that defining empowerment within the context of oppressive power relationships fails to address key connectivity issues. Instead, we develop a very different definition of empowerment that avoids this serious consequence, based on the Earth system as the unit of empowerment.

Rather than understanding empowerment within the context of power relationships, we see it as a deep drive that flows not only within us, but throughout our ecology, driving us to maximise our ‘human-beingness’. This is not the Enlightenment dogma, which places emphasis human progress and the perfectibility of humankind, but rather the deep ecological sense of our place within the Earth system, an experience that is normality for every other species on our planet.

Discussion

[Leonardsen \(2007\)](#) observes that any individual is situated within socio-economic, cultural and relational contexts. This intersectionality of contexts brings with it an intersectionality of power or lack of it. Hence, we are dealing with complex interactions. These situations lend themselves to an ecological approach, exploring empowerment within systems theory. Ecological ethicists would argue that any duty of care extends to nature. [Naess \(2008, p. 82\)](#) wrote that: ‘We may be said to be in, and of, nature from the very beginning of ourselves. Society and human relationships are important, but our own self is much richer in its constitutive relationships’. This is the domain of deep ecology or the strong ecological approach, where it is our re-integration into the Earth system, rather than our mimicking aspects of it, that sets it apart from most writing in the broader area of environmental social work.

[Curry \(2006, p. 2\)](#) observes that: ‘Nature is the ultimate source of all value. What is valued is what ultimately determines ethics’. Thus, these writers position nature as the foundation of our very meaning, from which we evolved and to which we must look to find our true identity and moral framework. Nature is positioned, not as a powerful example

of a functioning system which we should attempt to mimic (as in biomimicry [Benyus, 1997]), but as the true reality within which lies are only hope for well-being and integrity.

Very much like empowerment itself, much of the terminology surrounding ecology has been exapted from its meaningful context into completely different fields of study, such as business ecosystems, ecological economics and biomimicry. Ripping terms out of their meaningful milieu is extremely damaging, as much of their surrounding meaning is carried across with the term itself, along with acquired baggage from the journey.

This is the deep meaning of the relational self, where the self is actually only understood within its greater context. Thus, any concept of empowerment, we argue, should be based within the Earth system if it is to have any meaning, since, fundamentally, our existence, survival and well-being rely on our integration within the biosphere, the living planet.

Indeed, this understanding of our place within the Earth system has been lost rather than recently discovered. It is alive and well in First Nation communities around the world. Buen Vivir, the Andean philosophy, stresses that well-being can only exist within a community, and the concept of community is expanded to include nature (Gudynas, 2011).

Wali *et al.* (2017), working in the Amazon, grew to realise that First Nation Amazonian tribes had a strong preference ‘for paths to development that are based on an understanding and appreciation of their natural resources and culture’. Going further, a growing literature on well-being has emphasised the need for context-specific indicators of well-being for diverse peoples, called the ‘biocultural’ approach. Here, the relational self can only thrive if the unit of empowerment is the ecosystem within which they live, because well-being can only occur if the totality of their being, individual, society and ecosystem, is resonant with each other and is functioning as a totality. True system thinking recognises the unit of existence and function as the entire system, with component parts each tightly integrated.

Ecologically centred social work, where the Earth system is recognised for what it is, represents a paradigmatic shift away from Western philosophies, towards an understanding of humans as an interconnected part of the natural world (Gray and Coates, 2015).

Outcomes are emergent, meaning that they do not represent the sum of the parts, but are likely to be more or less than that sum. The properties of the system belong to the system, not to the component parts. At any level of organisation within the system, solutions will be sub-optimal, but optimised at the level of the overall system. As Farnsworth and Niklas (1995) point out, as the number of challenges increases upon a process, only solutions that are increasingly sub-optimal for each challenge will work. Thus, our own intersectionality, and the multiple relationships we are involved with, brings multiple challenges, which can

only be resolved sub-optimally if the whole is to function. However, sub-optimality is a characteristic of a system that is functioning well, and not a sign of failure, as it is so often portrayed. To reach a system-level solution, all actors must relinquish selfishness and embrace good solutions rather than best-for-me solutions. Real-time feedback represents the life-blood of the system, coursing through its veins whilst influencing and informing all of its components. Finally, the system will be self-organising, integrating the other characteristics in its operation (Skene, 2018).

Eylon (1998) emphasised the importance of embracing emergent outcomes, writing: ‘To reach this point [of increasing empowerment], individuals need to be willing to embrace solutions based on dialectic synthesis, even though one can never predict what form the new solution will take’. This lies at the heart of systems theory, and of the ecosystem as the unit of empowerment, where we should expect the unexpected or emergent, because of the complexity of the whole. However, real-time feedback is essential in order to understand something of the impacts of our actions upon the system. This is how natural ecosystems work, constantly listening and responding.

Connectivity is key, as is a meaningful distribution of responsibility (rather than power in the traditional sense). Policy must also be truly integrated, not governed by legislation focused on community empowerment or individual empowerment in isolation. A change in semantics is also needed. Terms such as clients, users, local authorities, carers and providers could be replaced with terms such as participants, activists, facilitators, practitioners and co-producers, where everyone shares these titles. This is the opposite to policies focused on personalisation and individualism, which seek to optimise for the individual.

It has been clearly demonstrated that ecological resilience thrives when an ecosystem is working at its best. This functionality, optimised at the level of the system, thus empowers the entire system in terms of ecological actualisation, leading to productivity, resilient communities and individuals, and well-being (Curry, 2006).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has outlined a new approach to empowerment, one that operates across all levels of society and whose unit of empowerment is the Earth system itself. As a systems approach, we would expect emergence, sub-optimality, real-time feedback, meaningful distribution of responsibility, self-organisation and connectivity to be the focus of policies and practice, as is the case in all complex systems.

We have sought to disentangle the multitude of interpretations of the concept of empowerment and of power, by searching for the unit of

empowerment. This approach appears to offer a unique clarity, both in understanding the meaning of the term and in understanding the application of the concept. At the system level, we not only integrate our actions within the fundamental organisation of the planet, the Biosphere, but also locate our identity and practice within the greater whole, allowing us to truly resonate with the Earth system.

This places our approach within the same framework as ecological and social action, emphasising the core elements of any successful system, whilst identifying a framework within which true well-being can be achieved.

For some 95 per cent of our time on Earth, we were all First Nation people, where relational self was contextualised within tribes, which themselves were contextualised within the landscape. Currently, a remnant of these people still survives, in spite of our best efforts to destroy them. And their wisdom and awareness of the ecosystem as the unit of empowerment is contained within so much of their writings and storytelling.

The scientific method, as a form of empiricism, struggles with the system approach of indigenous thinking, where spirituality and materialism are undivided aspects of knowledge (Berkes, 2009), but we would argue that any meaningful understanding of empowerment lies within such thinking.

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