Relationship and Empowerment

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Abstract
This paper examines the concept of empowerment through relationship from the perspective of the evolving theoretical approach of the Stone Center. The empowerment to act is viewed as arising from interaction within mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Attention is given to the importance of creating and sustaining relationships and relational contexts that empower women in all life activities. As an example, the author describes a workshop designed to empower women to become active politically in working toward nuclear disarmament.

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1. What is empowerment and empowering in relationships?

2. What constitutes an empowering relationship or relational context? This allows me to talk about more than a two-person dyad.

3. How can we help to create and support relational contexts which facilitate women’s empowerment? As a step toward this, I will give an example of a workshop designed to empower women to work for nuclear disarmament.

I want to thank everyone who has been part of the work on this paper. So many people here have participated in the ongoing relational process of inquiry into the nature of women’s development. The paper itself is an outgrowth of much dialogue and interaction in many different contexts. I particularly want to thank the Stone Center and this audience for creating the opportunity to continue the dialogue, to generate and consider new ideas together. I especially look forward to our discussion tonight.

**Empowerment in relationship**

**Women and empowerment**

Why has the concept of empowerment become so popular, and why have we been using it increasingly over the past few years to describe this essential aspect of women’s development? First, the use of this concept has encouraged a redefinition of traditional power models. In our first colloquium, Jean Baker Miller proposed a use of the word, power, as “the capacity to move or to produce change,” to replace the notion of power as dominion, control, or mastery, implying “power over” (1982). She suggested that women would have difficulty embracing a power model that involves competition or winning over others. Empowerment does not have such a connotation.

An alternate concept of personal power as inner strength and self-determination has appeared throughout the psychological literature (e.g., Rogers, 1975; Maslow, 1954), but this concept still evokes the image of the highly individuated self-actualizer. We have needed a different concept to suggest power with others, i.e., power in connection or relational power.

Thus, we have talked about mutual empowerment (each person is empowered) through relational empowerment (the relationship is empowered).

Recently, the concept of group empowerment has begun to appear in the community psychology literature (Rappaport, 1984), and in writing on methodologies for oppressed groups to gain political and social power (Freire, 1970). These writings describe widely diverse ends and means of empowerment. Rappaport has contributed a thorough-going review of the definitions and uses of the word, and has suggested that empowerment is an evocative but not yet totally definable idea, which varies among groups, settings, times, and purposes (1984). For the present, I define psychological empowerment as: the motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully, with the mobilization of the energies, resources, strengths, or powers of each person through a mutual, relational process. Personal empowerment can be viewed only through the larger lens of power through connection, i.e., through the establishment of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Thus, personal empowerment and the relational context through which this emerges must always be considered simultaneously.

The literature on group empowerment suggests that this process varies for any particular population according to the strengths to be mobilized and the means appropriate to that group. In this Colloquium Series, we have explored one of women’s particular sources of strength, i.e., the power to empower others, that is, to participate in interaction in such a way that one simultaneously enhances the power of others and oneself (Miller, 1982, 1986; Surrey, 1985a). While this basic model (often referred to as “nurturing”) is inherent in healthy parent-child development, it can be applied to all growth-producing relationships. “Nurturing,” however, sounds more like feeding or gardening and describes a more unidirectional growth process. Mutual empowerment better connotes the true potency inherent in a growth-promoting, life-enhancing, interactive process (Surrey, 1985a). As Jean Baker Miller has written, this process, perhaps because it has been in women’s domain, has been underestimated, trivialized, and misunderstood (1976, 1984). For example, a common misinterpretation of the relational process of “nurturing” or empathic interaction between mother and child is that the mother “takes herself out of the picture” to focus on the child’s needs or that the mother becomes “identified with” or “mirrors” the child. This misinterpretation overlooks entirely the highly complex and creative interactive process of empowering. In an earlier paper, I used the words “taking care of the relationship” as a way of describing relational activity (Surrey, 1985a). Again, this process can be more accurately described as empowering the relationship, i.e., acting to create, sustain, and deepen the connections that empower. (I might note parenthetically that I have experienced enormous difficulty in trying to find language to describe these interactive processes; as Jean Baker